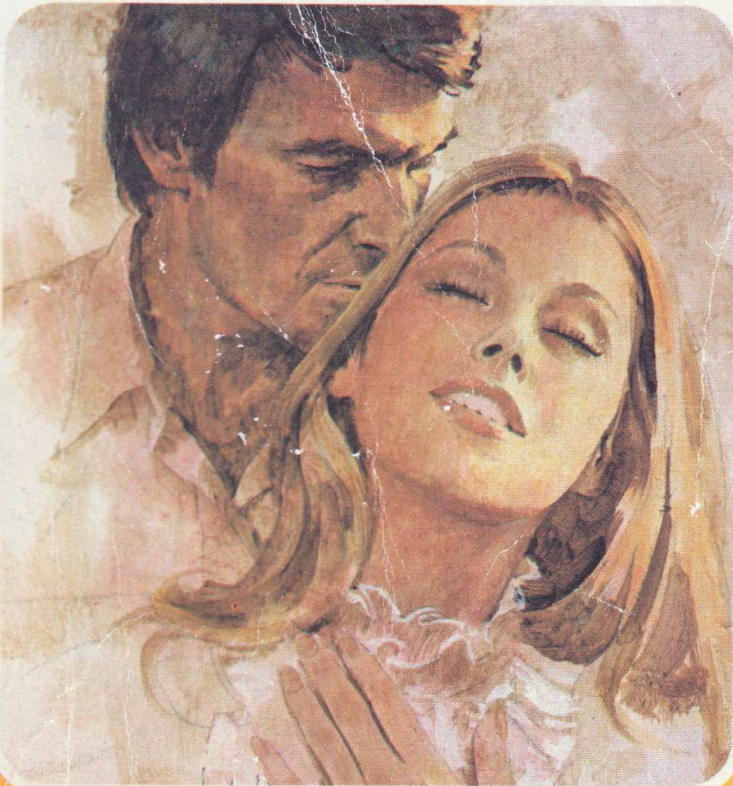


Mills & Boon Classics

Kathryn Blair

# THE HOUSE AT TEGWANI



# **THE HOUSE AT TEGWANI**

**Kathryn Blair**

Force of circumstance had obliged Sandra Cunningham to take a post as typist-companion to an elderly author, but her new life on the prosperous Tegwani Citrus Estate in South Africa turned out to be most pleasant. Mrs. Tremayn, in fact, thought so highly of her that she began to engineer a romance between her and her nephew, Philip. The only fly in the ointment was the owner of the Tegwani Estate, Brin Masterson, cynical, arrogantly sure of himself, and making no secret of his contempt for helpless English girls and his dislike of the philandering Philip. Nevertheless, Sandy soon began to wonder if he were not right in his opinion of Philip - to have, in fact, second thoughts about both men. But could she walk out on Philip now? And as for Brin, how could she ever hope to attract him - especially once his old and dear friend Katrina had arrived on the scene?

## CHAPTER ONE

SANDY flicked back a loose tendril, unconsciously leaving a dusty finger-mark along the side of her short but quite attractive nose. So far she had only transferred a garment or two from the trunk, which frothed its more delicate contents over her lap, into the pigskin suitcase that was set, looking uninvitingly blank, at her right side. Both her feet had gone to sleep, for an unrelieved waxen wood floor can be uncompromisingly hard to crouch upon, and she had a crick in the small of her back from bending.

When Anisa, the housegirl, came in to announce "elevenses" Sandy jumped up with relief. At first acquaintance with the custom upon arrival in South Africa two years ago, Sandy had thought "elevenses" merely an exaggeration of the English mid-morning break. Since then she had learned that it was an institution in Cape Province long years before the word had been whispered elsewhere.

As usual, she went out to her grass chair on the front stoep. Three months ago this was an hour of the day she enjoyed immensely, when her father might slip home from his school between lessons, nibble a fancy cake and tell her some titbits of local gossip. Such pleasures had ended with the plane crash over the Karroo. She had never known her mother; perhaps that was why she had lavished so much devotion upon Dad. His death seemed, for a while, to have torn the heart right out of her.

At the click of the gate she looked out between the pillars of the stoep. Above the long stiff leaves of an aloe, she saw the fair, springing hair of Philip Graydon, and she wondered what could have parted him from his desk in the middle of the morning. Lawyers' clerks do not often venture out upon social calls during office hours, even in easy-going towns such as Pietsburg.

As he mounted the steps he caught sight of her and his regular features relaxed into his usual merry, rather reckless, smile.

"Good morning, Philip," she greeted him. "What a pleasant surprise:." She indicated another chair near by and called to Anisa to bring another cup. "It's a long time since I had a guest for elevenses."

"I wish I might join you every day," he countered, raising his feet to a teak stool.

As she handed him his cup their hands touched. Sandy's fingers were always cool and gentle. Their touch invited Philip to look at the rest of her, a procedure which he carried out under cover of munching several of the expensive fancy biscuits.

The honey-coloured hair curled up from the temples, light as thistledown, and long dark lashes accentuated the wistful blue eyes. Her soft, compassionate mouth was parted a little with interest in her guest, and her chin was like her nose, short, straight and good-humoured. Add to the face a slim, creamy throat and a graceful figure clad in pink linen, and the result, if not beautiful, was decidedly appealing.

Obviously, Philip counted himself fortunate to have charge of the affairs of Sandra Cunningham. He only wished he were here to acquaint her with the news of some forgotten legacy, or something equally heartening.

Sandy herself brought him to the point.

"I suppose you've really come on business?" she said. "Am I completely on the rocks, Philip?"

"I'm afraid you are. For a schoolmaster, your father was not very businesslike or far-seeing. Apparently, he didn't even insure himself

before taking the plane trip." He shrugged. "I expect he thought he'd survive till years after you'd married and were safely the responsibility of someone else."

"That must have been it," she agreed quietly.

"Has it spoiled you for earning your living in some other way?" Philip enquired reluctantly. "Could you do nursing, do you think?"

"Nursing?" A faint alarm echoed in the word. "It takes so much physical courage to be a nurse. I'm sure I'd be no good at it."

"Possibly not," he had to admit. "I suppose there's a lot more to it than reading novels to convalescent he-men. You could do that beautifully." He smiled disarmingly. "Nursing's off, then. What else can you think of?"

She shook her head. "I can type, but I've never had any training for commercial work. Even if I managed to deceive someone into believing in my abilities, I have to live somewhere. This house is far too expensive, and so is hotel life."

"There's teaching, of course," Philip submitted. "Hardly any of the teachers at the private schools are certificated, and you might snaffle a job with a *rondavel* provided."

Again she had to shake her head.

"You're absolutely right," Philip said. "I can't see you knocking the three R's into little South Africans. Oh well," the practised charm of his smile came out, "we shall have to think up something else. You're not absolutely tied to Pietsburg, are you?"

"Oh, no. In fact, I think I'd like a change from town."

Pietsburg was fair-sized but clannish. A large proportion of the white inhabitants had known Mr. Cunningham, by reputation if not by sight, and Sandy was aware that they pitied and talked about her. A girl of nineteen who is known to be penniless and without a relative will inspire sympathy almost anywhere.- Sandy felt that she would like to move away and start somewhere new.

But her earning capacity was limited. Her mother had died when Sandy was very young, and soon after her eleventh birthday her father had left for South Africa. The Sussex boarding-school in which she spent the following six years of her life had been happy enough, but she had been even happier, at seventeen, to leave and join her father for good.

Sandy loved to ponder over the quiet happiness of the last two years in the little white house surrounded by palms and hibiscus.

What a joy it had been to keep house and sew and experiment upon dishes made with the abundance of cheap fruit and vegetables. Excellent training for a housewife, but Sandy thought it would be a very long time before she would need it. She became conscious that Philip was looking at her speculatively, his fair silky brows raised in enquiry.

"I believe I know the very thing for you, Sandy. An aunt of mine - a sweet soul who treats me far too well - has just taken a house at Tegwani. You won't have heard of Tegwani because it's really the name of Brin Masterson's citrus farm. The house is on a piece of Brin's land - he has thousands of acres - and is two or three miles from his place. Aunt Catherine writes books" - he grimaced - "not the sort that keep you burning the midnight candle, but dry details about cactuses and tree ferns and how to tell a peanut bush from a tobacco plant."

"That sort of book is wonderfully fascinating. But what could I do there to earn my keep?"

"Type what Aunt Catherine writes and help her to get busy making the house habitable. She's lived there nearly three weeks, but when I was out last weekend she still seemed sunk in a morass of books and papers, fountain-pens and unmended stockings. She's a dear, but a little impractical."

"How do I go about getting an interview with her?"

"You don't." Philip looked down into the wide, questioning eyes. "Next weekend I'll go and see her. I could take you then, for I'm sure she'll fling wide her arms to receive you. Is that too early?"

"It is, rather. I still have a good many things to dispose of."

"In that case, I'll fix it up and we'll go the following weekend. All right?"

She nodded, smiling. "It's wonderfully kind of you, Philip."

"Is it?" His glance, just the correct shade of brown to enhance his blond good looks, moved over her face. He flicked the handkerchief from his top pocket. "Stand still. There's an adorable smudge on your nose, but I think you'd rather be without it. There."

"Thank you."

"So long, then, Sandy. I'll report to you next Monday. Will you come out to the country club with me that evening, for dinner?"

"I'd love that, Philip." She watched him drive off and waved as he turned a corner.



When he telephoned the following Monday, Sandy could tell from his voice that her transfer to Tegwani had been satisfactorily arranged. It was typical of Philip that, having looked forward to an evening drive and dinner with a pretty girl, he was giving nothing away till she was safely in his car.

Aunt Catherine, according to Philip, wanted nothing so much as a young typist-companion.

"I told her I would escort you out to Tegwani next weekend, but she'd like you to go sooner. Could you manage to be packed by Wednesday?"

"I think so."

"Good. I shan't be free to drive you there, but it's all arranged. Brin Masterson came into Pietersburg today on business. He goes back on Wednesday evening, and you can go with him. Brin's rather special - as South Africans go."

"Oh, he's South African?" - doubtfully. "I hope he doesn't dislike us."

"Not Brin. Occasionally he's sarcastic at my expense, and he considers Aunt Catherine a bit of a nuisance because she insists on pestering him for new interior decorations. Women are not much in Brin's line."

"Isn't he married?"

"Heavens, no. I can't imagine Brin with a wife, though I suppose he will marry some day. A chap with an estate the size of his must have someone to spend his money on and leave it to. But he's thirty-three and entirely unimpressible. You may like him, though. He has certain rugged attractions."

Just then, Sandy was not much concerned with Brin Masterson. She was wondering about Aunt Catherine. Philip, she surmised, had already discussed salary and so on with his aunt, and was diplomatically leaving everything to be settled between the women when they met.

Later, when he had driven her home and drunk the last two glassfuls of Sandy's sherry, Philip lightly patted her shoulder.

"Don't be discouraged by the first sight of my aunt's house. She can afford to make a fine home of it, and it's the whale of a life once you settle to it. I'll be out to see you most weekends and we'll ride and play tennis together."

She smiled her thanks.

"And tomorrow, my dear, you must meet Brin. Wouldn't do to trek through the veld with a stranger!"

Sandy said good night to him and went to bed.

The next day passed without word concerning the man who was to drive her to Tegwani, but on Wednesday morning Philip sent a note. He was terribly sorry but he had to slip out of town, which meant that an introduction to Brin must be omitted. However, Brin had promised to call for her at five-thirty, and Philip was quite satisfied to leave her in such competent hands. He was looking forward to seeing her next weekend.

Sandy and the pigskin suitcase were ready at four. Slightly on edge, she wandered round the garden, oblivious of the giant red-hot pokers and tamarisk trees. By five-thirty she was growing frightened, and when a large touring car pulled up at the gate, her impulse was to slide behind a flame bush.

However, habit and convention drew her down towards the stranger. They met on the path just inside the gate. Sandy got an impression of large, dark-haired masculinity clad in riding-breeches and khaki jacket, before her hand was briefly enclosed within one four times its size.

"Brin Masterson," he introduced himself, in a voice much more cultured than she had expected. "Are you Miss Cunningham?"

"How do you do?" it sounded foolish, but how else could she respond?

"If you're ready," he said, looking past her at the suitcase which stood in the stoep, "we'll leave right away."

"Yes... I'm ready."

"Is that all the baggage you have ?"

"I'm rather afraid it is."

"Oh! Well, I'll heave it into the back."

Brin said no more and soon they were skimming along a central, tree-lined avenue towards the open road. Sandy had intended to ask him to stop at the solicitors' office so that she might drop in the house-owner's keys, but she simply could not summon the nerve to break the silence. She would have to post them.

Yet when they had left the houses and were travelling a tarmac road through open veld, he shifted in his seat just enough to be able to cast her a glance, and asked quite pleasantly how she liked the country.

"Very much," she answered shyly, "but I've only seen Durban and Pietsburg."

"Are you going to stay here ?"

"I hope so."

"Graydon told me that you're going as companion to Mrs. Tremayn. Her house is in a lonely spot, hardly the environment for a girl of... eighteen ?"

The mixture of enquiry and cynicism in his tone revived some of Sandy's spirit.

"Nineteen," she declared, firmly for her. "The loneliness doesn't terrify me a scrap. If Aunt ... Mrs. Tremayn is immune to it, I will be, too."

"Even if you have to travel thirty miles to a dance and there's no hope at all of a cinema ?" he asked, with a touch of derision. "I suppose you see yourself as a pioneer in the wilds. It's all been done, you know. There's not much left to conquer." His glance, a clear and startling grey, swept over her. "Your safest bet would be to bag a husband in Pietsburg and play bridge every afternoon with the other wives."

Sandy was silenced. In the casual utterance she had sensed hostility, and enmity in any form had power to hurt. This man was hardened from contact with the primitive and untamed; that much she realized and it made her wary, just as, when a child, she had avoided the unsmiling visitor.

Presently, Brin said, "It's cooling off. Would you like the window up?"

"Yes, please," she answered meekly, too frozen to dissemble.

The window was wound up and they did a few more miles. It was very dark now and the roughness of the road jolted the car unmercifully.

He slowed down and looked at her closely. "You're rather quiet. Are you cold?"

"Not very."

Perhaps her tone was unconvincing. A big brown hand came out and touched the back of hers. The next second the car halted.

"You little idiot! You're completely chilled. Why didn't you say so?"

"It wasn't much use," she managed.

He fingered her light jacket, almost roughly. "Do you mean you haven't another coat, beside this thing?"

"My mac is the sort that rolls small. It's in the case."

"A mac isn't any use against sudden evening cold. You need a coat, a warm one. I never carry a rug. Here, take this." He had thrust open the car door to give himself room to get out of his jacket. "Take it," he repeated peremptorily as she hesitated. "Get right inside it and button it." The car door slammed. "And you'd better have a spot of whisky to start up the heating apparatus."

He said no more till she had obeyed implicitly and they were once more on the move.

Then he spoke irritably. "If you're hoping to make a home at Tegwani you'd better learn to take care of yourself. We haven't time to follow everyone around."

Which, Sandy supposed, was intended to put her in her place, had she needed it. The warmth of his jacket seeped into her and made her feel decidedly smaller than her five-foot-one. She was stealing his warmth. Impossible that in this temperature he could be comfortable in a bush shirt; but he had become so entirely unapproachable that all she could do was sit tight and hope Tegwani really was a place and not a myth.

No, it was not a myth. The car turned between two huge white cement pillars, each bearing in black letters the single word, "Tegwani", and the drive, which still ran between raw veld, became as smooth as velvet. Now Sandy came to think of it, the road was rather like the man at her side, hard and efficient, without a homely wrinkle.

After leaving the posts they went on for so long that Sandy ventured a remark.

"Did I dream the name on the pillars back there?"

"This is all my land," he replied, without expression. "The posts mark the boundary. We shall soon be coming to Mrs. Tremayn's country seat."

He drew up almost on the doorstep. Apparently the house possessed no garden or confining trees. Sandy moved stiffly, sloughing off his jacket.

"Thank you very much," she said politely.

He slipped it on and slithered from the car. Within a few moments he had transferred her bag to the well-lit porch and was helping her to step out upon the rough path.

The door opened and a woman appeared.

Brin said, "Good evening, Mrs. Tremayn. I've brought the freight you ordered from Pietsburg."

"Fine," came the smiling reply. "Come in, both of you. Coffee and sandwiches are ready."

But Brin, having handed over the pigskin case to a house- boy, turned abruptly back to the car.

"I'll get along," he said, adding a slightly sarcastic afterthought: "I expect I shall be hearing from you soon. Good night."

Sandy, though inexpressibly grateful for the warm friendliness of the older woman's arm across her shoulders and the atmosphere of harmony into which she was being drawn, found herself listening to the receding noise of the car.

She was too inexperienced to realize that Brin Masterson was the sort of man one either liked a great deal, or loathed. She was not even sure whether she was glad or sorry to have made his acquaintance.

## CHAPTER TWO

AUNT CATHERINE'S "country seat", as Brin had termed it, was a square, white one-storied dwelling, with a red iron roof and a wide front stoep which ran three-quarters of the width of the house. The door opened to a small hall containing a carver chair and a dusty fern, and led into a long, lofty corridor, on the left of which lay three bedrooms, and to the right the lounge and dining-room. The kitchen and bathroom were shut off at the back of the house.

Aunt Catherine's whole outlook, comfortably middle-aged and without envy of youth, held a strong appeal for the girl who had grown up motherless.

By the end of their first day together she felt no awkwardness in calling her hostess-employer "Aunt Catherine". And what a sensation of gratitude she felt in knowing that she was accepted and liked on sight, and her services needed. For Mrs. Tremayn, clever and delicate over the handling of her twigs and blossoms, was neither housewife nor needlewoman. From the very beginning Sandy could see that her hours would be well filled, and the knowledge made her happy.

Fifteen years ago Aunt Catherine had been married for the brief period of ten months. She had met her husband in Nigeria and it was there that he died of an obscure fever. It was not till then that the books on nature study began to flow from her pen and brush. In the following years her works had developed into text-books, and her field had widened to embrace two continents.

At last she had come to Pietsburg, chiefly to live near the nephew she adored, but also to work on the local greenery. Through his office, Philip had connections with Brin Masterson and knew he owned a vacant house on the citrus estate.



"Both Philip and I had many tussles with Brin over this place," explained Aunt Catherine to Sandy, with some relish. "He was using it as a seasonal storehouse, and though it was completely empty when we made our enquiries, he turned us down flat. At last, after my showing him one of my books - about Africa, of course! - his respect for me mounted slightly and he consented to let me rent it on a yearly basis. I tried to buy from him, but he nearly turned me out of his house. What that man has, he holds!"

"Perhaps this house has sentimental associations for him," Sandy suggested doubtfully.

Aunt Catherine laughed. "When you are more acquainted with Brin you'll know better than to use the word sentiment in connection with anything he does. He's tough, and blunt, and not in the least susceptible."

"Yet from your tone I believe you like him."

"I admire him," Aunt Catherine allowed, her round face serious. "So long as I don't probe into his private affairs he and I get along splendidly."

"Does he live alone?"

Aunt Catherine nodded. "In a lovely Dutch-gabled farmhouse among his trees. One day I'm going to persuade him to let me paint it... but I daren't ask till he's promised me my timbered ceiling!"

Sandy smiled. She would have liked to ask whether Brin came down often, and did he entertain in his own house.

Instead she commented-, "His accent is very English."

"So is his surname. Brin was born here of parents out from England, I believe ... though I'm not sure. I do know that he went to Cambridge."

"Then why is he down on English people ?"

Aunt Catherine's nose crinkled humorously. "Oh, he had the misfortune to meet a few folk out from the old country whose aim is to live well and work little in this sunny land. He has no time for slackers, which is an admirable trait, but stultifying."

Sandy had been three weeks at Tegwani before Brin Masterson came to the house. Aunt Catherine was out sketching, and Sandy, her head turbaned and her print smock the worse for paint spots, was a little cross to hear the car pull up about an hour before lunch. She supposed it was another bush trekker, or one of those travelling salesmen.

She laid her brush across the paint tin and went out through the kitchen. Sunlight caught her blindingly across the eyes, and when she could see, the broad shoulders of Brin confronted her.

"Good morning," he said pleasantly.

"Oh!" Instinctively her hand went up to snatch off the turban, and a second later she wished it hadn't, for the scarf had caught the confining comb in her hair, and the pale honey strands clouded out, making her feel decidedly foolish.

He grinned. "Quite effective. Don't smooth it. The windblown look suits you."

Sandy hid her embarrassment with convention. "Won't you come in? Mrs. Tremayn is out, but we can offer you something to drink."

"In a minute." Brin twisted and surveyed the turned earth near the house. "Are you starting a garden ?"

"Yes. Do you mind? I don't think your cattle will miss this bit of grazing, and frankly, it is rather disconcerting to look up from a book to find a cow staring in through the window at you."

"They'll lunch off your marigolds and daisies if they're not fenced off. I'll send Oom Jannie up tomorrow with a couple of boys and a load of blue-gum stakes. Oom Jannie looks after my squad of maintenance boys."

"Thank you ... very much." Sandy was disconcerted into stammering. "I was afraid you'd ... well, we have been making rather nuisances of ourselves..."

The thick, darkish brows rose enquiringly. "Have you ? I can't recall hearing anything from either of you during the last three weeks."

"We've tried not to worry you."

"Why?"

She avoided the direct grey stare. "Perhaps I would have asked your permission to put our boys on the job, if you hadn't offered first. Shall we go in now ?"

Brin seemed inclined to linger on the beaten earth path, but in a moment or two he followed her round to the front of the house and through the door, which was held wide open by a stained and polished log. Brin eyed the log, a trifle mockingly, and then looked at the ebony table bearing an ivory mandarin gazing inscrutably into a jade pond.

"Ravishing," he commented, handling it. "Where did it come from?"

"Philip snapped it up at an auction in Pietsburg."

He set it down again. "Auctions are mostly held during office hours. Still" - a satirical note crept in - "no doubt Philip worked twice as hard on the strength of having snaffled a bargain." He spared a flickering glance for the bowl of poinsettias, and turned into the lounge.

Sandy had taken advantage of his pause in the hall to rip off her smock and to slip the comb back into her hair. Thank goodness the curtains were half-drawn against the sun; the dimness helped to hide the shine on her nose.

"What will you drink ?" she asked.

"What can you offer?" He was smiling again, taunting the manless establishment. "Tea and cooking sherry? Aren't they the Englishwoman's criterion of beverage and strong drink?"

"They may have been when you were last in England," she returned equably, pouring whisky. "Now it's only tea, and not much of that. Soda?"

"Thanks." His eyes narrowed at her over the top of the glass. "How are the chironias and wild figs going?"

For a second Sandy was nonplussed. "Oh, you mean the botany ? Aunt Catherine is out now, collecting, or something. She brings home plants every time we take a walk."

"Does a boy go with you ?"

"Not often..."

"You must never go wandering in the bush without a native," he said sharply, setting his glass with a small thud upon a walnut table at his elbow. "How would you handle a reptile if you met one?"

" We always carry a stick."

"Do you think you'd have the nerve to use it ?"

"Well" - hesitantly - "Aunt Catherine might."

"Exactly," he said crisply. "If I asked Mrs Tremayn the same question she'd dither just as you did, and say that Sandy might." Her name upon his lips gave her a faint shock. She scarcely heeded as he continued forcibly, "You're neither of you to go far without a boy. The nearest doctor is at Fort Gradock, and my boys need the bulk of my serum. You haven't any, of course ?"

"No." Sandy tried not to sound lame. Men were apt to fuss too much about fevers and snakes and drinking rainwater.

"I'll spare you a little and let you have directions for dosing. If either of you should get bitten by a snake or anything else, let me know at once."

She promised, and offered him a second drink.

He declined. "It's unusual for me to drink during the morning. Besides, I've still some work to do before lunch."

But he did not move at once. The chairs were deep and embracing, and muted sunshine filtering through the kaffir-cloth curtains pleasantly warmed the air.

Sandy said, "I suppose you really called *to* see Aunt Catherine ? Can I give her a message ?"

"Must I have a reason for dropping in on my own tenants?"

"I didn't mean ... Philip says you live and breathe your work..."

"Graydon would express that opinion of anyone who does an honest day's toil now and then. I'm sorry" - as she opened her mouth to protest. "Am I trampling sacred ground?"

"We can't do without lawyers."

"They do brighten up a weekend," he agreed drily, "especially blond ones. Graydon's quite good at tennis, isn't he?"

"He always beats me, but I'm afraid that's no praise. Do you play?"

"Quite often. I have a hard court. You and the young Adonis must try it some time." He stood up and added carelessly, "Perhaps you and Mrs. Tremayn will come over to dinner one evening this week? An old friend is staying with me. He dislikes my masculine household and refuses to believe that feminine women exist on the veld. Will you help me to confound him?"

"Thank you ... for the invitation and the compliment."

He looked down into her smiling face. Rich colour had flooded into the golden tan of her cheeks; her red lips curved gently, and the blue eyes that met his were soft and shy.

There was a widening moment of silence. Then, abruptly, Brin moved and spoke.

"Will you tell Mrs. Tremayn that I'm still hung up for timber for her ceiling? I'll send the fencing tomorrow, and also some cuttings of mesquite and hibiscus and jacaranda, and anything else that I can think of. You'll need shrubs and trees for shade, or nothing will grow." He had reached the front door. "When it rains everything will

shoot up quickly. Otherwise of course, it would hardly be worth your while starting a garden at all. Mrs. Tremayn will probably move on when her book is finished." By now he was out on the Stoep. "Oh, and about dinner... tomorrow ?"

"I'll ask Aunt Catherine and send you a note."

"Good. So long."

He leapt the red polished steps and walked swiftly to his car.

Sandy returned to the lounge feeling strangely tired. Her cheeks still burned and she had lost all inclination to dabble with paint. It seemed to her that the room still retained a male fragrance; a blend of cigarette smoke and the soap he used ... was it sandalwood ?

Ten minutes later Aunt Catherine came in, carrying a sheaf of mosses and a letter.

"I met the postboy," she announced, fanning herself with a leaf from a wild banana she must have encountered during her morning's prowling. "The letter is from Philip. A friend of his is giving a rather special party tomorrow and has invited us both."

Sandy ventured, "I've more or less told Brin Masterson that we'd go there for dinner tomorrow to meet a friend he has staying with him."

Aunt Catherine waved her plants. "Oh, has Brin been down? It's like him to expect us to do his entertaining for him - after ignoring us for three weeks. He mustn't mind if we put off dining with him for a day or two. We can't possibly disappoint Philip. Won't it be nice - a party mid-week and driving back in the dawn!"

Sandy said yes, it would be fun. Even to herself she did not acknowledge a sense of disappointment, though she was half afraid that Brin would not renew the invitation in a hurry. Looking back

over their little chat this morning, remembering all he had said, she saw that the invitation constituted the real reason for his visit.

Till this moment, Sandy had not realized how much she wanted to visit the old South African farmhouse in which Brin lived.

Sandy first saw the farmhouse with Dutch gables on a Saturday afternoon, about ten days after Brin's invitation to dinner. Aunt Catherine's apologetic note had elicited a short reply: "Sorry to have clashed dates with Philip. Never mind. Some other time." Thereafter Brin was silent. Until yesterday.

Aunt Catherine had been seated on a campstool sketching -just for pleasure - a sweep of rocky hillside which ended in a copse of mimosa and karri trees. Sandy, negligently stretched by her side on the grass, trickled dry earth through her fingers and stared unblinkingly into the perfect blue sky.

Aunt Catherine said, "Can you hear a horse ?"

Before Sandy could collect herself to listen the horse and rider had appeared, almost noiseless in the yielding grass.

Brin swung to the ground and saluted them. At once he came forward and looked down at Sandy.

"Get up," he ordered. "I've told you before not to take risks."

"The grass is so baked nothing would want to live in it," she protested, obeying him nevertheless.

She walked a little way from the others, to brush the bits from her skirt.



Brin stood above Mrs. Tremayn, examining her canvas and comparing it with the original.

"Not at all bad," he commented.

"Prettily put," said Aunt Catherine. She searched for her rag, and when Brin had retrieved it from a thorn bush she began to wipe her brushes. "I suppose we're lucky that you don't cultivate this stretch of land, or clutter it with cows. It's one of the best views on your estate."

"Strange you should mention it. I have a man coming out tomorrow, a retired army officer who used to grow tobacco long years ago. He's going to examine the soil to determine whether it will take tobacco."

"Oh dear. Tobacco!"

"The fields look good in growth. You'll like it."

"I'd prefer trees of some sort, even orange trees."

"Citrus farming gets monotonous. I enjoy it, but I've always wanted to experiment with other crops. Major Kennedy has promised to manage the tobacco growing for me, if the soil is right - and I think it is."

"Does that mean there'll be two men living at your house from now on?"

"Only for a while. I may have to build for Kennedy."

His tone was offhand. Aunt Catherine looked up at him curiously.

"I suppose he would have lived in our house had it been free?"

"Naturally."

"Rather than put you to the trouble and expense of building I could look elsewhere."

"That isn't necessary. Kennedy says he'll be satisfied with a *rondavel* till he chooses a site. After all, if he's to live here for good he might as well build a house to his own taste."

"I'm glad about that," said Aunt Catherine. "Sandy is making our house so sweet and comfy that I'd hate to turn out of it now. She's improving your property no end. You ought to come and look round."

"I noticed the lounge and hall a week ago," he said, not without a trace of sarcasm. "Polished log doorstep and chintzy-wintzy curtains."

Over her shoulder Sandy put in quietly, "The curtains are kaffir cloth bound with green linen ... and a polished log is just as good as a cast-iron cat to hold open a door."

There was an instant's pause before Brin answered. "No need to get your back up. I quite liked what I saw of the improvements."

"I'd sooner live in our bungalow than in your farmhouse," Aunt Catherine said briskly. "Your exterior may be lovely, but the rooms are too large and shivery, and you need a woman in them. Don't you agree, Sandy?"

"I haven't seen them," she replied briefly.

"Then you must." The older woman looked straight up at Brin. "Wouldn't you like us to come over tomorrow afternoon to help entertain your Major?"

Brin gave a sardonic bow. "Come as early as you like and stay to dinner."

"Philip will be down for the weekend. He'll come with us, of course."

"Of course."

Soon after that Brin left them, and Aunt Catherine packed her things and folded her stool. On the way home she had talked not of Brin, but of her nephew.

Philip was not too pleased when confronted with the engagement at the farmhouse. But he stowed tennis racquets into the back of the car and put on a sports suit. Sandy had slipped on a tailored silk dress, the most sensible all-purpose wear she could think of, and Aunt Catherine was ready for anything in flowered chiffon.

For about a mile and a half the car followed the main tarmac road through the estate. Then, at a sudden dip, they met a road off to the left signposted "Tegwani House". Steadily, this road led downwards between dense oaks, Cape chestnuts and mesquites. This was Brin's timber lot, from which he drew all the wood needed on the estate.

Presently, the forest faded into occasional mulberry and pear trees, and then, turning a corner, they were within sight of the house.

White, gabled, with a roof of rich brown thatch, it hid among date palms and ornamental cactuses, the end walls festooned with purple bougainvillea. On each side of the drive stretched emerald lawns splodged with the dark leaves and brilliant blooms of Chinese lanterns and coral vine.

As the car pulled up, Brin came out to meet them. With him was a well-built man who, though wearing a light- coloured lounge suit, had an obviously military bearing. His hair, brushed smartly back from a tanned forehead, was quite grey, but his smile had youthfulness, and his step was light and springy. At fifty, Major

Kennedy could play a fast game of tennis, and beat anyone in the district, except Brin Masterson, on the polo field.

After the exchange of introductions, Sandy found herself with Philip's hand on her elbow, being guided into a vast lounge furnished expensively, but with Dutch severity. The chairs and sofa, covered in hide and heavily studded, possessed not a single cushion between them, and, instead of the occasional tables which are so necessary to fill up spaces in huge, lofty rooms, a few darkwood stools thonged with raw white leather stood about, rather frightening in their starkness. The curtains were a plain blue cottage weave.

A tea trolley introduced a human touch, and Aunt Catherine's chatter helped to dispel a reticence between the men. But Sandy was glad when tennis was suggested.

"I don't play," observed Aunt Catherine, "but I shall be delighted to sit and watch. I always watch Philip and Sandy."

Sandy played badly. She couldn't help it, with that audience of three. Though to be sure, the Major spared only half his attention to the game. He talked to Aunt Catherine while Brin lay back in his deck chair, his gaze unwaveringly on the players.

When the game ended Sandy said she was too tired to play a doubles. No one questioned the excuse.

"Care for another knock-up, Kennedy?" asked Brin.

"Would Graydon rather play again?" the Major responded politely.

Philip declined. He stood at the back of his aunt's and Sandy's chairs, following the smashing game between two merciless opponents. Before it ended he leaned over Sandy.

"Shall we go for a walk, Sandy? There's plenty to see. And you, Aunt Catherine?"

"No, darling. Take Sandy indoors and give her a cool drink. Have a lovely long walk and show her the orange trees before it's dark."

For different reasons both Sandy and Philip were relieved to escape. Today, more even than before, she was conscious of an antagonism in Brin. Apart from conventionalities, he had not addressed her, and she had the feeling that he intended her to see that here, where a man lived and worked, she did not fit in. And she could not quite forgive him that abrupt "Miss Cunningham".

Philip's dislike of the farmhouse and its owner was a simpler emotion. Brin's arrogance and financial security were too evident.

He led Sandy back into that forbidding lounge, and when she had drunk a lime and soda and he something stronger, they came out again and took the wide concrete path that wound through the vegetable garden into a small pasture which ended at a symmetrical row of grapefruit trees.

Half in earnest, Philip commented, "Marvellous chap, Brin. He even packs and markets his own fruit because he doesn't trust the co-operative association to handle his goods with the respect due to a Masterson product. One could like the fellow if only he weren't so darned sure of himself." Carelessly, he shrugged off the subject of Brin. His arm pushed through Sandy's. "Shall we slip off to Fort Cradock after dinner? I look forward all the week to dancing with you on Saturdays."

"I'm not quite in the mood for dancing."

"If it's a mouldy mood, my sweet, dancing is the easiest way to dispel it." His tone lowered. "I know why you're afraid to go with me, but

you needn't be, Sandy. I promise to take only one drink and not to speed."

"It isn't that. Won't Brin think it strange if we go off straight after dinner?"

"More likely to be relieved. Only Aunt Catherine is at ease here, the pet. I'm sure she'd back us up."

Finally, Sandy assented.

Cool as it was out here among the trees, she still felt as sticky and miserable as when she and Philip had finished their game of tennis. Almost she was grateful for the pressure of his arm against hers.

"You know, Sandy," he was saying softly, "there's a lot you don't yet understand, particularly about men. I bet you're totally inexperienced."

Her smooth young brow puckered as she toed the dry leaves with her sandal. "Aren't most girls inexperienced till they meet a man and marry him? What man would want to marry a girl who's learned everything from someone else?"

"Quite a few men like sophisticated women, especially townsmen. When a girl knows her way about the man doesn't have to pretend."

"Do you have to pretend with me?"

Her frankness drew from him a small laugh. "Yes, I do. I have to pretend that I haven't the least wish to touch you or to make you blush for me. I have to pretend that I'm a very nice man to match your sweet little girl."

"But you *are* a nice man, Philip."

"Could you be fond of a nice man like me ?"

"I like you very much."

"Enough to let me... teach you a few things ?"

They had come to the end of the trees and stopped, almost facing each other.

"What sort of things ?" she asked.

"Can't you guess ? I'm' only human, you know."

The late sun shed a bronze light over his fair head and even contours. Now, he was holding both her wrists, gently, persuasively. Sharply, her head turned aside.

"Yes," she said quickly, "I can guess. But ... not yet, Philip."

He did not release her at once; indeed his fingers tightened just a little.

She added hurriedly, "Please! Here's Brin."

They were a yard apart when Brin reached them.

Unsmilingly, he said, "I wondered whether you'd missed your way in the trees. We're dining at seven-thirty."

"We've been discussing citrus and its effects on the life romantic," drawled Philip, digging his hands into his pockets. "Girls who eat oranges are supposed to have clear skins, aren't they ?"

"I wouldn't know. My work doesn't include experiments of that sort. I only grow the stuff and ship it to England, where it's needed."

"Unapproachable brute, aren't you, Brin?" Philip's drawl had taken an edge. "What do you do to relax?"

"Grow pineapples," was the laconic reply. "Good ones, too."

"But apart from growing things," Sandy insisted, to her own surprise. "Don't you dance - or go to parties?"

"I'm a member of the Pietsburg and Fort Cradock Clubs. No" - decisively - "I don't dance, so if you two want to go off to Fort Cradock after dinner, you may do so with my blessing but without my company."

"How did you know we might want to go?" Sandy asked swiftly.

Brin's smile held mockery. "You can't expect to live within two or three miles of anyone out here without their knowing all about you. There isn't much you do that we don't hear of. Don't let it worry you," he added nonchalantly. "Both the Major and I are well seasoned."

There was no time for further revelations. The Major came out in a fresh lounge suit, and Sandy and Philip went in to wash.

The dinner, with a choice of several meats, was well cooked and presented. Cautiously, Sandy took a little Witzenberg, a light wine which Brin described as the perfect "ladies' tippie". Coffee was served, not in the grim old lounge but in a smaller room with baggy chairs set round a log fire, and lots of books and ash-trays lying about.

Presently, Philip enquired, "Does anyone mind if Sandy and I drive into Fort Cradock?"

"I was about to suggest it, dear," said Aunt Catherine comfortably. "You've scarcely been alone together all day."



"Hard luck for you," Brin inserted drily. "Wasn't this visit originally planned so that Sandy could look over my house?"

"It's too late, surely? Rooms always change appearance by lamplight."

Sandy said hurriedly, "I *should* like to see the rest of the house, if I may."

Brin rose and called for a lamp. "I'll take you round. No, don't disturb yourselves" - as Philip and the Major got up. "We shan't be long."

This was not quite what Sandy had expected, a tour of his house alone with Brin. However, she followed him into the semicircular hall and up the central corridor, which led to four bedrooms, two of them so large that massive bedroom suites left oceans of polished oak floor visible between sheepskin rugs. Brin did not explain which room was his, but she guessed it to be one of the smaller bedrooms, the one with a pair of unmounted buck horns lying on a chair. He had only let her peep into that one from the door.

"You've seen the lounge, dining-room, bedrooms and the small sitting-room where we left the others," he said in businesslike tones. "The boys will be in the kitchen clearing up, and anyway, my kitchen is not so different from yours." He paused at a door in a small recess. Sandy could not see his expression, but his voice altered. "This is a little cubbyhole I often use when I'm alone. Care to see inside?"

His sanctum, she thought. "May I?" she said.

He went in first and set down the lamp on a desk just below the window. The only other furniture was an easy chair, and a bookcase on top of which stood a photograph. The frame was backing the light, but Sandy could see that it held the picture of a woman with dark hair.

Brin lowered himself to the arm of the chair and looked across to where Sandy leaned against the desk.

"Well ? Are the rooms too large and shivery ?"

"Some of them" - hesitantly. "I like the smaller rooms and this little den of yours. And ... and I like the smell."

He grinned. "Is there a smell ? I hadn't noticed it."

"All houses have a smell. Most of those I've been in out here reek of wax polish. Yours has it a little, but there's something else as well." She smiled. "Does that sound foolish?"

"It sounds girlish. What else have you noticed about my house?"

"May I be honest?"

"Impertinent, too, if you like."

"Well ..." — even with his permission, she stammered. "It's much too large and the furniture - all of it - looks hard and repellent. Frankly, I loathe cowhide chairs in the home. And it wasn't very imaginative of you to hang blue curtaining at every window, was it ?"

"Imagination in furnishing a house of this size might prove an embarrassment."

"You could have completed as many rooms as you needed and left the rest till... you married," Sandy finished.

"The womanly touch?" he jeered lightly. "You're a great believer in sweet romance, aren't you ? A cottage for two and a dog on the mat. I'm afraid you're in for the devil of a bump one of these days."

"Perhaps. I suppose to a man of your type, love is a word to be derided. I know it's been overworked and mismanaged but the quality of permanent love still exists ... I'm sure of it."

"We're all sure of it ... at your age." Tantalizingly, he half closed his eyes. "The trouble is that this love business *doesn't* stay the course. If you choose a partner for no sounder reason than that you love him, you've failed before you start."

"How would *you* select a wife ?" she challenged him.

He laughed. "That's a poser I sometimes put to myself. I'd have to care for her the deuce of a lot to begin with, of course, but other things would be equally important. I'd look, ahead to the time when this quality you call love begins to fade..."

"Need it fade?"

"I'm afraid so, little one ... human nature being what it is. And when the gilt has worn off it's as well to find something bedrock underneath."

"Yours is a harsh philosophy."

"A rational one," he countered. "Your brain is so stuffed with womanly ideals that you're blinding yourself to reality." His voice cooled, perceptibly. "I should have thought Graydon reality enough for any woman."

"Why do you dislike Philip ?"

"I don't. We're opposites, that's all. What annoys me is that such a spineless boulder should have two nice women eating from his hand."

"That's unfair!" Inwardly, Sandy was beginning to tremble. "It's true that Aunt Catherine adores him - a man's weaknesses don't bar him from being loved ..."

"And you?"

"Philip has been good to me and I'll always be grateful to him." Defiantly, she added, "I'm fond of him."

He threw out a hand in disgust. "You're attracted to him as you'd be attracted to any man whose faults might be hidden by extreme good looks. Mrs. Tremayn can see that and she's using it for all she's worth."

"How dare you speak of Aunt Catherine like that!"

"I'm stating a few facts that you're too modest to realize," he returned grimly. "Mrs. Tremayn wants you to marry her nephew. She's pushing you into each other's arms. Surely you can see that ?"

"And if she is?" Sandy was not at all sure of herself but she had to retaliate. "If Philip needs me ..."

"Of course he needs you! You must be there to smile gently as you remove the decanter and the whisky bottle, and soothe his pettish moods. Mrs. Tremayn may not appreciate just what she's doing, but if she succeeds it won't be long before she regrets it. You and Philip Graydon are poles apart. Even if you were in love with him, I doubt if could stand up to the disillusionment of marrying a man of his sort."

"I think I may safely wait till Philip asks me to marry him before considering that side of it," she said unevenly. "Love that jibs at sacrifice isn't worth much."

"On the other hand," he stated with a shrug, "sacrifice that isn't backed by something stronger than a girlish ideal might prove wearing. Think it over, child, and if you stumble among thorns, don't say that Uncle Brin didn't warn you."

With a lazy movement he stood up. He was so big and the room so tiny that instinctively she tried to back away. But the desk was there. Her hand, flung out to steady herself, caught the lamp and it toppled. Brin lunging forward to grab it, dropped one hand hard upon her shoulder.

"That was a near thing!"

"I... I'm sorry," she said shakily, near to his jacket.

The next second his arms had closed round her so tightly that she could scarcely breathe. His mouth came down and found hers, savagely, pushing her head back into the crook of his arm so that her hair flowed over his sleeve. It was a merciless, draining kiss, that left her numb. <sup>v</sup> He released her so suddenly that she swayed. White-faced she stared at him, hardly noticing the darker colour that had come up under his tan.

By the time he had straightened his tie and got his hands back into his pockets he was smiling, cynically.

"You see? There's quite a bit more to it than sweet sacrifice. Remember that when Philip pops the question."

As he opened the door and stood aside for her to pass, their glances met. Mockery glinted from the grey eyes, mockery and something else that Sandy thought must be anger.

Her mouth compressed to still the trembling of her lips, she almost ran from the room.

## CHAPTER THREE

FROM the front garden Sandy could watch the clearing of the ground for tobacco planting. It showed a widening rust- coloured gash in the low bush with dark, parallel irrigation channels cutting across it at short intervals. Where the shrub was thickest it was burned off the earth before turning, so that a constant odour of smoke hung about the house.

The Major rode up to apologize for this, explaining that he was hurrying the boys through this unpleasant process as fast as he could.

Sandy asked him in for elevenses. Though it was unusual to disturb Aunt Catherine when she was writing, Sandy knocked at her door.

"Major Kennedy's here. Would you like to see him?"

"What does he want ?"

"To apologize for smoking us out. Will you have tea in the lounge with us this morning ?"

Aunt Catherine sighed. "I'd just reached the construction of the crassula family... very interesting."

However, she screwed on the top of her fountain-pen, took a quick survey of her neat, plump figure in the mirror, and accompanied Sandy back to the lounge.

The Major rose and bowed. His manner was charming as he seated first Aunt Catherine and then Sandy.

"I hope very much that Sandy - I may call you Sandy? Thank you. I hope very much that Sandy did not persuade you to leave your work to entertain me, Mrs. Tremayn."

"Oh, no," replied Aunt Catherine politely.

"That's an unvarnished fib, Aunt Catherine," put in Sandy mischievously. "I interrupted the construction of the crassula family."

The Major looked startled. "Would that be - er — one of the weeds round here?"

"One of the wild flowers," Aunt Catherine corrected him gently. "If you've travelled in South Africa you must have met many of the four hundred species of crassula. There is one in particular, the bryophyllum, which propagates itself in a most unusual way; the leaves fall before they are dead and take root. Remarkable, isn't it?"

By now the Major had his bearings. "Extraordinary," he remarked. "Most extraordinary. I should very much like to read some of your books."

"Would you? Botany is not nearly so interesting in print." Aunt Catherine took a second biscuit. "Are you still living at Tegwani House?"

"Yes. My *rondavel* is nearly complete, but I shall continue to take meals at the house. Brin is anxious for me to choose a site for building, but there's no water between here and the river." He leaned back luxuriously, a hand on each arm of his chair. "What a pleasant room this is. So ... *homely*. The word is trite but no other will convey what I mean. There's warmth in this room ... harmony."

"You notice it by comparison with Brin's cold barn," asserted Mrs. Tremayn. "That house was intended for a noisy family, not a confirmed bachelor."

"Is there such a thing as a confirmed bachelor?" enquired Sandy. "You tell us, Major."

"There may be a few men who are impervious to feminine charms. In fact, so far I've prided myself on being one of their number. Since coming *to* Tegwani, however," he finished gallantly, "I'm fast losing most of my preconceived notions regarding... ladies."

"Extremely kind of you, Major," said Aunt Catherine.

"For that," added Sandy, "you may come and see us as often as you like."

Ten minutes later, with some reluctance, the Major stated it was time he returned to his work.

All three were at the gate, where his horse was tied, when Sandy asked suddenly, "Do you ride back to Tegwani House each day for lunch?"

"It would waste too much time. My boy prepares enough to keep me going till dinner, and I have a tent - you can't see it from here - which provides shade for a short rest."

Sandy raised her brows questioningly at Mrs Tremayn, and glanced back at the Major. "When Aunt Catherine's in a writing mood she's a little absent-minded. After you've gone I'm sure she'll be terribly cross that she omitted to ask you to lunch with us whenever it's convenient."

Aunt Catherine coloured, quite prettily. "That's naughty of you, Sandy, just when I was on the point of inviting the Major." She turned to him. "You will come, won't you? And if Brin should be with you at lunch-time, try to make him come, too. He's never yet taken a meal with us."



After accepting with thanks and expressing the regret that today he had promised to meet Brin the other side of the river, the Major cantered off.

"He's a dear," said Sandy, "and he admires you, even if you do prevaricate."

"Sandy!"

"Confess that you hadn't thought of asking him to lunch!"

"The poor man would have been frightfully hurt if he'd known that. One can see he's sensitive."

Which was not a word Sandy would have used to describe Major Kennedy.

Since the visit to Tegwani House, Philip had suffered from a moroseness which at times reached a sullen pitch. Aunt Catherine jollied him and packed his weekends with the sort of pleasure he generally enjoyed, but though he was still as sweet with her, she knew him too well not to be aware of an unrest in him.

Being a woman, she noticed that he was cool with Sandy, and she could not help wondering if the girl were not a little to blame for her nephew's unhappiness. She wished she could be sure they had not quarrelled.

That was a doubt on which Sandy could have relieved Aunt Catherine's mind. She had refused to quarrel with Philip. On the way to Fort Cradock that night, after Brin's brutal kiss, Philip had begged her to "be nice" to him. Just then, her nerves aquiver, Sandy had thought she would never again be nice to any man. Philip had construed her coolness as a personal insult and accused her of

heartlessness, to which Sandy had returned a complete silence. During each of the three weekends since then he had maintained an ,offended casualness with her.

Sandy's few contacts with Brin took place in the presence of Aunt Catherine or the Major, or both. He always greeted her with an exaggerated inclination of his head and a derisive grin, and thereafter practically ignored her existence.

One day, when he and the Major lunched with Aunt Catherine, he announced that the timber for her ceiling had arrived. It was special wood, ordered up from Durban.

"I'll lend you Oom Jannie for a few days," he said. "He'll make the pretty pattern on the ceiling for you and distemper and paint the room afterwards."

"He need only fit the wood to the laths. Sandy will do the rest, thank you, Brin."

"Women don't go in for that sort of job."

"They do in England," Sandy put in quietly.

"This isn't England. Besides, women have no heads for heights. Supposing you were working a dozen feet up and fell?"

"I've done the walls and ceilings of four rooms without a mishap."

"Be satisfied, then, and leave the rest of the redecorations to Oom Jannie. His boys are well trained and he'll see that they leave the place clean."

Sandy bent her head and fingered a fork she hadn't used.

Aunt Catherine broke a small tension. "You don't understand, Brin. Doing out the rooms is recreation to Sandy. She *likes* the work, and it would be such a pity not to let her finish it. There's only this room and my bedroom still to do. You know how thrilling it is when you've attacked something big and are getting towards the end of it. Don't deprive Sandy of her pleasure in completing the house."

"If I'd known she was actually distempering ceilings I'd have stopped it before," he said irritably. "What goes on in England doesn't bother me. I won't have a girl doing that sort of work on my property."

Sandy did not follow the men outside, when they left. She stayed seated, drawing patterns on the white tablecloth with her fingernail. Brin's imperiousness had hurt her more than she cared to show. What Aunt Catherine had told him about her wanting to complete the work herself had not impressed him in the least. He had grasped the chance of asserting his authority, no matter whom he bruised in the process. He was inhuman.

She heard a firm step in the hall and the dining-room door pushed open. Brin came a few steps into the room.

"I just slipped back to say that I'm sorry if I was overbearing just now. It annoyed me to think of your climbing about with a can of whitewash."

She answered coldly, "You might have complained that morning when you came upon me in the middle of it."

"I thought you were just painting a stool or something. Surely you've lived long enough in South Africa to know that our women don't work about the house. Some of them cook and sew and do light gardening, but all the rest is left to Africans. The boys live and keep their families by the work we provide. You see how it is ?"

She nodded, not looking up. "You won't object to my hanging the new curtains and plumping a cushion now and then?"

A smile was audible in his voice. "You can be a sensible child ... sometimes. But there's something about you that makes me want to give you a sound shaking. You're such a blind little idiot."

"You've told me that before, in different words."

"Yes. And in my zeal I even kissed you to give the words point. Remember?"

Her lips quivered, and parted, soundlessly. Her glance remained lowered.

"All right," he said roughly. "I'm all sorts of a brute. I know it. You came here with your gentle English ways expecting to find the South African as soft as you are. But the majority of us haven't been cosseted by civilization. We were brought up in a wild country, among wild things, and we were taught to despise the sort of civilization that breeds decay. That's why I'm a planter, and that's why I despise men such as Philip Graydon."

"Brin," she whispered, raising her head at last, "tell me about it. I want to understand."

He was too angry to notice the catch in her voice. His teeth snapped. "You couldn't understand. Only a woman with a background such as my own could do that!" He stopped for a second. "Save your tenderness for Graydon. If half what I hear from Pietsburg is true, he needs it."

He turned and strode out. Sandy remained limply in her chair, feeling dangerously near the verge of tears.

The following weekend Philip did not come out to Tegwani till Saturday afternoon. Aunt Catherine had worried herself nearly sick when his car appeared, a small ball of dust a long way off on the tarmac road.

When Philip stepped out on to the path as though afraid it might be hinged, his aunt had to hide her anxiety with solicitude, for he looked pale and done up, and, what hurt most, he would not meet her eyes.

She slipped an arm about him.

"Come inside, darling. Sandy is getting tea ready. That's why she isn't here to meet you. Poor Philip. Have you a chill or is it a bad head ?"

"Neither," he said shortly. "Don't fuss, Aunt Catherine. I'm quite well but rather tired. I sat up playing cards half the night."

"How silly of you when you might have been resting here, with us. You do too much, my dear. Look, here's Sandy, prettier than a picture ... and a nice big pot of tea. Sit down, dear, and don't talk if you'd rather not."

Sandy made no reference to his pallor or to the sigh with which he sank into his chair. She pushed a table nearer to him and set upon it his cup of tea and a plate.

"A sweet or a savoury sandwich, Philip ?"

"I'm not hungry."

"Try a cake, then. You don't need to be hungry to eat one of those."

"For heaven's sake," he said pettishly. "I've just driven fifty miles in the dust and heat. All I need is a whisky and soda."

"A spot of whisky in a cup of tea is supposed to be stimulating," Sandy suggested.

"Allow me to know my own needs best!"

Aunt Catherine's frown grew deeper. "He's tired, Sandy. Ask the girl to bring the drink." As soon as he had drained his glass Philip went to his room and did not reappear till dinner-time. Shaved and in a fresh suit his appearance was less jaded. Aunt Catherine, alone in the dining-room, raised her cheek for him to kiss.

He said, "You're top good to me, Auntie. Forgive me for this afternoon?"

"We all have off-days, darling, and this is one of yours. You must spend the evening at home and go to bed early - unless you really feel well enough to take Sandy into Fort Cradock?"

"I'll stay here," he answered abruptly. "Sandy will be relieved."

Hearing a movement outside the door, Aunt Catherine deemed it wisest to smile at him and to include Sandy in the smile as she came in.

In spite of Mrs. Tremayn's bright endeavours, the meal was tedious, and much of the food returned to the kitchen untasted. Later, Philip took a book into the lounge and in a little while the women followed him there, Sandy with some sewing and Aunt Catherine toting a box full of specimens to be sorted ready for rejection or writing up.

It was about ten when Philip called for a drink. He closed his book and yawned.

"You won't mind if I turn in as soon as I've had this, Aunt Catherine?"

"Sleep is what you need most, my dear. Shall we let you lie late in the morning?"

"I always waken early."

Quickly, he swallowed his drink and went out, leaving a painful silence. At last, Aunt Catherine gave up feigning interest in her mosses.

"I'm afraid Philip's moodiness has upset me a little. It's so unlike him. I feel certain he's unwell."

Impulsively, Sandy slipped to the floor beside the older woman's chair. She lifted the box from her knee and laid her cheek against the silk dress.

"Don't worry, Aunt Catherine. Philip admitted that he was up half the night playing cards." She winked up at the sweet distressed face. "I rather think he lost more than he could afford and he's not happy about it. Between us, we'll put him right tomorrow."

Next morning all three were up early. They breakfasted together on the front stoep, and if Philip talked less than usual and still had a weary look under the eyes, his mood was not aggressive. He wandered round the garden with the women and even enquired the names of some of the shrubs.

Presently, he glanced at Sandy. "Care to drive out to the Drift with me?"

Aunt Catherine, surprised and delighted, thought it a splendid idea, and when Philip left them to get out the car she linked her arm in Sandy's.

"He wants to make it up with you. Philip can't bear to be on bad terms with anyone, least of all you. Your good opinion means a great

deal to him, Sandy. I know you will help him to throw off his troubles."

Sandy slipped indoors for a scarf to tie over her hair, and five minutes later they were leaving Tegwani for the main road from Pietsburg.

Whatever the Drift had been when given its name, now it was a canyon with steep wooded sides and precipitous lips. Approached from the road it had the appearance of a gargantuan green crack in the earth's crust. It was by scrambling down one of the channels left by heavy rains that one got the view for which the Drift was locally famous. Firs and pines, blue gums and mesquites, karri trees and wild mulberry crowded together, reaching up and up; and each side, above the billowing tree-tops, the vivid red of the rocks sparsely tufted with veld grass and pinks, while overhead arched the brilliant, speckless blue of the sky.

Sandy, was continually awe-struck by the beauty and the hush of the place. Now, when Philip's fingers found hers and squeezed them, she scarcely noticed him.

"This is a roomy ledge," he said. "We might sit for a while. Think you could be comfy here, at the foot of that tree?"

"What about you?" She grasped his hands and the tree trunk, and lowered herself among the tiny ferns.

"I can manage here, just below you."

When they were settled his head was near her skirt. He turned and looked up, a diffident smile on his lips.

"I'm terribly sorry I was such a beast last night, Sandy. Every darn thing seems to have gone wrong lately, and I've taken the coward's



way out. You see, I'm not the sort of fellow who can forge ahead under his own steam. I need companionship and sympathy. I'd thought I was getting somewhere with you till that night at Fort Cradock when you shrank from me. Is that really how you feel towards me?"

With apparent casualness, she was examining a fern leaf. "I don't think so," she said slowly. "I'm really very fond of you, but..."

"I know," he broke in quickly. "But I'll pull up if you'll help me. I suppose I've got in with the wrong set at Pietsburg; they're moneyed and I try to keep up with them. Perhaps the pleasure-seeking is revulsion from my job. There isn't a deadlier profession than the legal one, especially in a country like this, where the sunshine is always tempting one outdoors to work up a thirst. You do believe that I'll pull up, don't you, Sandy?"

She looked at him, clear-eyed. "I've never yet had reason to doubt your word, Philip. Yes, I do believe it."

"And you'll forgive my rotten behaviour? Are we back where we were?"

His candour and eagerness touched her deeply. She nodded, and he smiled with some of the old boyish charm, though his gaze lowered as he went on, "Every time I'm alone with you I want madly to kiss you. But I know it isn't fair to ask it of you yet. You can't possibly want to kiss anyone who's behaved as I have during the past month ... you don't know the half of it. But I can wait... so long as you'll trust me."

Yes, Sandy believed in him. For Aunt Catherine's sake and his own she had to believe in him. Resolutely, she put her hand in his. There was a balm in being so desperately necessary to another human being.

Had she needed it, Aunt Catherine's radiance when he left Tegwani smiling that evening was ample reward for her unspoken promise to Philip.

Next morning, Monday, Oom Jannie's little mule strolled right up the garden path, and from its back the old man announced that his boys were following with the wood for Mrs. Tremayn's ceiling.

Sandy, standing by in the stoep while he drank some coffee, listened to his gossip about several farmers in the district whom she had never met. Finally, she managed to break in.

"Your boys are a long time, Uncle Johnny."

"*Ja*. When the master's away ..." He shrugged expressively.

"The master ? Do you mean that Brin has left Tegwani ?"

"Two days ago, by car. He has gone to those relatives of his in Rhodesia."

"Oh! Is it usual for him to go there ?"

"He has not been to Rhodesia for many years. But this year is different. I told you Miss Katrina spent much time on the estate a few months ago. Now Brin goes to her home - it is a good sign."

' Did he say how long he'd be away ?"

Oom Jannie shook his head. "Perhaps he told the Major. I don't know. But I'm sure he'll return before the citrus comes into flower. Maybe he will bring back Katrina!" With a chuckle, he ambled down to the gate to look for his boys and their laden ox-cart.

Mechanically, Sandy picked up his empty mug and turned into the house.

So Brin had left his precious trees and gone to the home of Katrina Felsted. He'd said that only a woman with a background similar to his own could understand him. Katrina was such a woman. Was she also the original of the photograph in his den ?

And if Katrina *were* the girl of Brin's choice, how could it possibly affect Sandra Cunningham ?

## CHAPTER FOUR

THE heavy rains came just right for Major Kennedy. His three hundred acres were cleared and ploughed, and at the first downpour he was ready to set boys at once to planting.

On the days when he came to join "the ladies" for lunch, he had to slip off his waterproof and gum boots before entering the house. When he had washed his hands and was seated at the dining-table, he would explain the pleasures of planting, and how he looked forward to settling down on the Tegwani Estate.

"Have you chosen your house site yet, Major?" Sandy asked him one day.

"Well ... no." He paused awkwardly. "Brin and I discussed it before he went away and we agreed to leave it over till we'd had a tobacco season."

"Does that mean you'll stay on in the *rondavel*?"

"Either there, or at the house. The *rondavel* is very cosy - a one-roomed private house, so to speak - but rather restricting to one of my size!"

"They look so pretty," put in Aunt Catherine. "I've often wanted to live in one, but I suppose they have drawbacks. I thought Brin was anxious to settle you in a house of your own."

"He is." The Major hesitated, as if he were choosing words to say more, but apparently he could think of nothing to add.

Aunt Catherine, whose perspicacity at times was astounding, looked at him shrewdly. "Brin knows that you like this house. Has he asked you to wait till we vacate it?"

"I assure you —" he began hurriedly, and then, aware of humour in her expression, he smiled and said, "That's what is vaguely in his mind, I suppose. Anywhere else in this stretch of country, water is the problem. But please don't think that I'm terribly anxious to take over so large a roof of my own. I have the *rondavel* and all the vacant rooms in Tegwani House at my disposal."

"But after army life," inserted Sandy, "you *would* like a hearth that belonged to you, wouldn't you ?"

"Naturally," he agreed cautiously. "Though it would offend and hurt me if you left Tegwani on my account. Believe me, I don't look forward a scrap to occupying this house, simply because when I do you ladies will have gone from the district."

"That's sweet of you," said Sandy.

"Very sweet," added Aunt Catherine abstractedly. "I expect Brin told you that I have an option to renew the lease for a further year. I don't work very fast, you know ... a book generally takes me about eighteen months ... and I wasted the first weeks here simply because I couldn't settle."

"Renew by all means," he replied promptly. "Your first year still has some way to go, hasn't it ?"

"We've been here nearly four months, but I'm working badly. Still, by the end of the year I shall have collected all the material I need. It can be written up anywhere."

The Major again protested that Mrs. Tremayn must stay as long as she wished, and before he left, begged her to forget that the subject had been discussed. When he had gone Aunt Catherine stared thoughtfully from the window.

"How vastly men differ from each other. Wouldn't you think that Brin might let the Major take half of that great house?"

"Brin can't bear to share anything," Sandy replied coolly. "Besides, he may have other plans."

"That's true. Before you came in to lunch Major Kennedy asked me to lend him my furnishing catalogues. Brin wants them sent to Rhodesia. It's possible that the people he's visiting are refurnishing and finding it difficult in the backwoods. On the other hand, the Major rather thinks there's a cousin he's interested in. If Brin suddenly decides to marry, the Major will be very awkwardly placed."

With an attempt at lightness, Sandy said, "You'll have to marry him and bring him here."

"Marriage at my age must be somewhat disconcerting. I could never change my ways to suit a man. It's your marriage I'm interested in, Sandy, yours and Philip's."

"We're neither of us ready for it yet," she answered quickly.

"Is it... money?"

"Not entirely. I want to be sure of myself. I feel I ought to wait a bit."

"But that's wrong; you're sensible, and you're both in love. Philip is thirty, you know. Do you think it fair to make him wait nearly two years? As to money, all I own is Philip's. He won't have to hang on till I die to benefit; that's so morbid. Next weekend I'll tell him that I shall settle a substantial amount on him when he marries. That will smooth the way for both of you."

Sandy, on the point of pleading with Aunt Catherine, went quiet instead.

Circuitously, Sandy heard that Brin would be home before the end of the month. She wondered if he would return alone, and whether he would come to see them or wait for a chance meeting.

He had never talked to her about the plantation, or invited her to make a tour of his land. Katrina must have been over it many times. She, by all accounts, was a superb horsewoman, a strong and beautiful creature such as all South Africans... and many others ... admire. Apparently, in Katrina, Brin had met his match in the way of arrogance and possessiveness.

The more Sandy thought about them, the more she felt inclined to shrivel into a shell and tuck herself away on a high shelf.

Aunt Catherine noticed Sandy's unrest, so one afternoon she made a suggestion.

"I need new shoes and we're both low in undies. Let's take a week off, Sandy, and spend it in Pietsburg."

"You mean stay at an hotel ?"

"Why not? The Regency is very good and not too far from Philip's club. We can shop and have feminine fun during the day and go to parties in the evening. I'm sure you can do with a really riotous week."

"What about your work ?"

Mrs. Tremayn puckered her nose. "I believe I'm getting tired of being a botanist. At the moment I feel that when this book is finished I'll never write another. It's only a phase, of course, because we've stuck it too long here without a break." Her voice warmed. "I believe we'd enjoy a week in Pietsburg immensely."

After Sandy had pondered the idea, she rather thought so, too.

When Philip came the following Friday evening he was surprised and delighted to hear of their proposition. He would drive them back with him on Sunday, and take them straight to the Regency. He was quite certain there was no need to book rooms between seasons.

"I'll think up something for every night of the week," he told them, "and take the day off on Wednesday so that we can all go to the races. We'll have a grand time together."

He slipped an arm about each of them and hugged them, infecting them with his high spirits.

So it was almost with excitement that Sandy prepared for the holiday in Pietsburg.

"Pack your best tuckers, both of you," Philip cried gaily. "You're the two prettiest girls a fellow ever took on a beano."

In his best humour it was easy to be fond of Philip.

On Sunday morning the Major rode over. Sandy was down at the gate, alone, when he dismounted and bowed, and she smiled at him, and reached over to pat the mare's nose.

"You're going to miss us next week, Major. Aunt Catherine and I are going gay for a few days in Pietsburg."

"Oh! Well, I'm glad for you and sorry for myself. I hope you will have a very happy time." .

"Pity you can't come along and make up a four," she suggested artlessly. "Would something dreadful happen to your tobacco if you left it for a week?"



He laughed a little. "If Brin were here I'd let the tobacco take its chance. You see, I set his boys to work each morning before I start my own gang."

"Couldn't Oom Jannie be trusted to do it for a day or two ? I'm sure Aunt Catherine would love to have you come."

He paused. "You really think that?"

"I'm certain of it."

"Then" - again he paused - "perhaps I could manage to slip into town one or two evenings. You and Mrs. Tremayn have shown me so much hospitality that I should be delighted to have the opportunity of returning it."

When the Major repeated his intention to Aunt Catherine she gave him her usual soft smile and said it was kind of him to contemplate taking so much trouble just for a few hours in town with them; four to a party was certainly a more comfortable number than three.

During the week in Pietsburg, Sandy contacted an entirely different world from the one she had frequented when her father had worked there. Among a certain set Philip was popular, and each evening one or other of his friends threw an open party.

Sandy had to invade her slender funds for the purchase of a new green evening dress and gilt sandals, and on the whole she enjoyed the air of perpetual excitement and gaiety, though how Philip stood it, month after month, she could not understand. By Wednesday night, after a hot windy afternoon at the races, tea with one noisy crowd and dinner with another, followed by dancing to the exotic

rhythm of the Pietsburg Club band, Sandy was beginning to feel a nostalgia for the peace and monotony of the veld.

The two quietest evenings were those they spent with the Major. He gave them dinner at the Club and afterwards drove them out to a local eminence, from which the town appeared as a ragged circle of fairy lights in the blackness of surrounding trees, while the star-sown sky hung above them like an inverted indigo bowl.

On the second of these two nights the Major and Mrs. Tremayn, having exhausted to their own satisfaction the beauty of the place, stayed in the car while Philip and Sandy took a stroll.

"Friday already," Philip said, his hand on her arm. "I've never known a week pass so quickly. Has it been good, Sandy?"

"Lovely." But she sighed. "I'm awfully tired, though. We hardly seem to be in bed before it's time to get up."

"My aunt sticks it well. At your age you should do even better."

"Aunt Catherine doesn't dance. Also she has the faculty for sleeping on in the mornings and dozing after lunch. I'm not grumbling, Philip. You've given us a marvellous time."

"But you won't be sorry to go back to Tegwani ?"

Hearing the warning note of irritation in his voice, she smiled up at him. "It was you who first sent me to Tegwani. You mustn't be cross because I happen to approve your choice."

"I'm not cross. That you should pretend to like that tract of no-man's-land is rather incredible, that's all. Aunt Catherine is different. She's older, and has lived in rum places for most of her adult life. You can't really like Tegwani."

"Tegwani is my home," she answered quietly.

He shrugged with exasperation. "How can you say that! England is your home ... as it is mine. I've often been on the point of giving up my chances of a partnership and going home. Only Aunt Catherine has stopped me. I suppose she feels that if I can't make good here, I shan't do it anywhere."

"If you had more confidence in yourself..."

He turned suddenly and caught her hands. "How did we get on to this grim subject? Here we are, beneath a marvellous African sky with the scent of mimosa all about us, and cicadas chanting their night songs, and you're on the point of lecturing me ... when you should be kissing me."

She drew back a fraction and his grasp became firmer.

"I've been so patient, Sandy," he said in a low, urgent voice. "There's only one possible ending to the heavenly week we've had together. Kiss me, Sandy."

Quickly, unsteadily, she tried to pull away from him.

"Philip, please. We can still see the car, and they must be able to see us."

"It doesn't matter. They're probably expecting this of us. Sandy..."

"Don't!" With a sudden wrench her hands were free; she heard his breathing, heavy with frustration. "Not now, Philip... with others watching."

"Tomorrow, then?" he demanded angrily. "Tomorrow, Sandy ? Will you promise ?"

"Philip..."

"Tomorrow is our last evening together in Pietsburg. I must be sure of you before you go back."

"Very well. Tomorrow."

For a moment he remained staring at her. Then he managed a smile.

"Thank you, my sweet. Tomorrow Sandy will melt, but not before. Well, I've waited so long, I daresay I can stretch it to an extra day." In more normal tones he added, "If we're not going to use this perfect night we might as well get back to the car. Then you can go to bed early and make up for lost sleep."

Until she was seated in the back of the Major's car, Sandy was unaware that her nails had clenched fiercely into her palms. Now, her sudden revulsion from Philip appeared abnormal. His was a set in which kisses were lightly exchanged and forgotten. Was she setting too high a value on a commodity which was plentiful and cheap? Wasn't it rather old-fashioned to regard a kiss as a symbol of heartwhole love, to be given generously and freely, but only to one man?

Here, Sandy's thoughts stammered. If... *if she was going* to marry Philip, he would be the one man. Her kisses and loyalty were his by right.

Hot and confused, she lay back in her corner of the car and closed her eyes.

In the brilliant light of Saturday morning, Sandy's disquiet of the night before faded. Apparently he was asking nothing more of her than a kiss, and if an embrace would make him happy, why withhold it ?

By lunch-time her fears had so dispersed that had he bent and touched his lips to hers in the hotel foyer she would have laughed and hardly blushed. At least, so she thought.

That afternoon, Sandy and Philip watched cricket at the Club while Aunt Catherine rested. Undoubtedly, Philip was pleased with himself. Occasionally, he caught Sandy's glance, intimately, and sought for her fingers. They shared a pot of tea at a table beneath a Cape chestnut, and he leaned on both elbows, regarding her quizzically, with some of his old charm and a new proprietary air. In his light suit with the jacaranda-blue tie he looked very fair and handsome.

Upon her return to the hotel, Sandy found Aunt Catherine still in her bedroom propped upon pillows, looking pale and dark-eyed.

"I'm sorry, dear. My head's spinning and I really can't stand upright. The week of excitement has laid me out. A woman of my age should be satisfied with a single night out once in three months."

Instantly sympathetic, Sandy fetched two aspirins and a tumbler of water. When Mrs. Tremayn had swallowed them she relaxed, and let Sandy gently massage her temples.

"Your fingers are so cool," she said. "You should have been a nurse."

"Or a pastrycook," Sandy remarked drily. "Feel better?"

"Heaps. But I think horizontal is my position till tomorrow morning. You and Philip must go to the Club dinner without me."

"I'll stay with you, of course." Sandy's tones had lifted in sudden hope.

"No, I won't have that. This is your last evening and you must make the most of it. Wear the white dress and pop in to see me before you go."

At a quarter to eight, conscious that the white dress enhanced the golden tan of her neck and arms, Sandy came down to the lounge. Philip was already there, taking a Martini, and he got up quickly, his glance flickering appreciatively over her slim figure.

"Is Aunt Catherine late again? I thought she only took trouble with her dress when the Major's about."

"She isn't well - a bad head."

"Oh, dear. I'm afraid we've used the poor darling too harshly this week. Had I better go up to her?"

"I shouldn't disturb her."

He hesitated. He really cared for his aunt. "I'll slip back here after dinner, just so the poor pet doesn't feel neglected. If you and I were alone for a nicer reason, I'd be delighted."

It was a high night at the Club, a celebration dinner. These special festivities occurred about once a fortnight, and no one was ever sure what they were celebrating, or who should be congratulated on what. Everyone was jolly, and as the evening passed the fun grew riotously noisy.

It was ten o'clock before Philip tore himself from the ballroom. Someone had just asked Sandy to dance, and Philip told her to go ahead; with luck Aunt Catherine would be asleep, and he'd be back in half an hour.

By now, Sandy was drooping a little. When the dance ended she excused herself and went outside. The chilly night air prickled over

her skin and drew her farther round the terrace, to a bench in the shadow of a wall.

Here, it was quiet and very peaceful. Either the night was too cold or the hour too early for the usual couples who strolled and leaned upon the hibiscus-covered walls. But presently, a couple did saunter along the terrace and pause at one of the pillars ... two men. And one of them ... Sandy sat bolt upright and very still.

The men exchanged a few words, lit cigarettes, and the shorter one said good night and loped away down the steps. The other stayed, smoking, his profile bold against the night sky, his wide shoulders negligently thrust against the pillar. At last he tossed his cigarette in a glowing arc into the bushes below, and turned.

Sandy stiffened. Brin made a small sound and came forward.

"For the love of Pete! What are you doing here ?"

"Aunt Catherine and I have been in Pietsburg this week," she said.  
"We go home tomorrow."

"To Tegwani?"

Was he, too, questioning her right to call Tegwani home ? Sandy nodded.

He bent closer. " Have you no wrap ? You'll hook a chill."

"I'm not cold." She moved as he sat beside her. "When did you return from...Rhodesia ?"

"This afternoon ... the devil of a journey. If you ever go far in South Africa, Sandy, take a plane." His head twisted, and he regarded her curiously. "Why are you sitting out here alone?"

"I was tired. The night smelled so cool and sweet and it was lovely to find a lonely spot for a few minutes."

"Sorry I intruded ?"

"No." Had she answered too swiftly? "Did you have a good holiday?"

"Quite good. I'm glad to be back, though. I suppose *you* can't tell me how my trees are looking ?"

"I never walk your way."

"You should. Orderly rows of productive trees have a chastening effect upon the soul."

The teasing note in his voice stirred her pleurably. "I thought you resented trespassers upon your property."

"You've lived there long enough to have passed out of that category. Soon, the trees will be in bloom. Have you ever seen acres of orange blossom ?"

She shook her head. Orange blossom. A year ago she had seen a wreath of it, flawless petals and buds crowded close together, crowning the bridal veil of a friend in Pietsburg. She had not noticed the blossom was real till the bride stood beside her husband, his hand clasped with hers over the handle of the cake-knife. Almost Sandy could feel again the pang she had felt then. Had it been ... envy ?

Brin said, "Brides used to wear orange flowers in their hair. Nowadays they go in for diamond tiaras and pearl caps."

"Not all of them," she replied involuntarily.

He made a faint sound of amusement. "Can you see yourself as a bride with all the flowing white stuff and a wreath of flowers?" He



fingered the fold of her dress which lay nearest him on the bench. "It might suit you. Something of this sort plus the headgear." Now he laughed outright. "I've never attended a wedding without being struck by the absurdity of it all."

"So you've decided that your bride shall not wear white?"

"The girl I'd choose would be too sensible to deck herself out in white silk and flowers to amuse the mob."

It was spoken jestingly and Sandy was not sure what he meant to imply. Just as lightly, she answered, "So long as you don't ask her to wear riding-breeches!"

Brin got out cigarettes and offered them; when she took one he raised his brows. "I've never seen you smoke."

"Aunt Catherine persuaded me."

When he had put away his lighter he stood up. "I brought down some dogs from Rhodesia. Like to see them?"

"Very much. Where are they?" She was following him along the terrace.

"In an outhouse at the back of the Club. I'm staying here tonight. Careful." He grasped her arm as her heel slipped on a highly-polished step. "This way. Mind your dress."

He seemed to forget that her pace was only half the length of his. Breathless and inexpressibly happy, Sandy let the strong hand lead her along the path between sweet-smelling shrubs; they came to a door in the wall, and immediately he opened it the dogs set up a din.

"Shut up," he said, muttering something else about the "blamed light."

He found the switch and a bare electric bulb sprang alive, illumining whitewashed brick walls and three dogs, each so different from the other that Sandy laughed delightedly.

One was a huge, sleepy-looking sheepdog who apparently was only barking to assert the superiority of his size. Attached to the opposite wall by a length of leather strap, strained an ugly mastiff.

"Keep away from him," Brin warned. "He can be nasty."

Sandy swooped and gathered up the other occupant of the outhouse, a Cairn puppy. Her cheek went down against his silky fur and she moved it gently, looking up into Brin's grinning face as she did so.

"He's adorable," she murmured. "So warm and soft, and so grateful to be made a fuss of. I expect you've been a brute to him."

"On the contrary, he had a front seat the whole way and slept in one of my bush shirts. I don't know why I took so much trouble with the little beggar. I hate small dogs."

"No one could hate this little beauty. He's such a baby and so defenceless. What do you call him?"

"He answered to Mac on the journey down, but he's young enough to change the name if you can think up one better."

"I?" She raised her head, slipping the puppy down into the crook of her arm.

Brin's smile had a baffling quality. "You'd like him, wouldn't you?"

"You didn't bring him for me?"

"I think I must have" - with a little jeer at himself. "Certainly I've no use for a dog of that size. When I went out to a farm to pick up the

other two they showed me this little runt, and at once I thought of you. When I first saw him he fitted inside my pocket."

Sandy's mouth quivered with a new sensation. Brin, the hard and intractable, had actually succumbed to a tiny beige puppy which had reminded him of herself. She smiled tremulously.

"What's doggy about me ?"

"Nothing. He happens to be a pretty puppy and all too trusting of the human species. He's just the type to get swallowed whole by a larger dog ... unless he's taken great care of."

For a second she met the mocking grey eyes. Then she bent and placed the puppy on the floor and when she straightened the smile had gone and the red curve of her lips had compressed slightly.

"Have I dropped a brick?" he said quickly. "Sorry. I'd forgotten what a sensitive little idiot you are. Let's say that I bought Mac because I was sure that you'd like him. But there was another reason, quite a sincere one. Want to know it?"

She nodded, without looking up. With one large brown hand he reached and collected Mac and dropped him once more into her arms.

"I wanted to make you a gift, something I could be sure you'd like... and *keep*. Satisfied ?"

Her chin raised, her eyes shone.

"Am I reinstated?" he asked. Not waiting for so obvious an answer, he added, "He'd better stay here with the others tonight and I'll leave him at your house tomorrow." Rain thundered suddenly upon the roof. "That sounds healthy. Where's your wrap ?"

"In the cloakroom. It's only a thin one."

"Will Mrs. Tremayn be worried about you ?"

"I don't think so." Why was she reluctant to mention Philip ? "But it must be getting late."

He looked at his watch. "Eleven-thirty. This rain is here to stay. Which is your hotel ?"

"The Regency."

"Wait here. I'll slip into the Club and borrow a waterproof for you, and back the car as near as possible." The next minute he was gone.

Sandy waited, hugging the dog, and trying not to wonder about Philip. By now, of course, he would be furiously certain that she had vanished deliberately. How was she to explain an absence of an hour and a half? Supposing, desperately, she relied on the truth; wouldn't Philip be more angry still ?

The time had passed too quickly, and Brin was friendly, almost charming in his blunt, forthright fashion. So he had come back to Tegwani alone. He didn't strike one as a man in love, but men never did walk round with starry eyes and a smile in their hearts, least of all a man like Brin. Had he come to an understanding with Katrina? Was that the explanation of his good humour... ?

His return to the outhouse broke into her thoughts. He was wearing a dripping oilskin and carrying a bundled raincoat.

"Couldn't borrow one your size," he grinned, "so you'll have to encase yourself in mine. I ought to know by now that some time or other I shall be called upon to keep you warm and dry. It might even pay me to carry a few spares to fit you."

He lifted the Cairn back into his basket and dropped the coat round Sandy's shoulders. Quite gently, he buttoned it at the throat.

"Hitch your dress; a pity to spoil it. Are you ready?"

"Yes," she said breathlessly, her eyes sparkling.

"Right." She felt herself swung up into his arms, caught the familiar fragrance of cigarettes and sandalwood. "Keep your head close to me and tuck in your shoes."

Somehow, he managed to snap off the light and slam the door behind him. And then he was striding through the pelting darkness, carrying her as though her weight were hardly more than that of Mac, the Cairn.

## CHAPTER FIVE

PHILIP had found his aunt lying awake. To his faint tap she answered "Come in" quite strongly, and when she saw that her visitor was Philip, she smiled and beckoned him into the room. He helped her into a cosy bed-jacket and arranged the pillows at her back.

Lightly, he kissed her forehead. "Better, darling?" And to her nod: "That's good. Do you feel able to eat something now?"

"It's too late for that, but I would like some coffee. Will you join me?"

Of the boy who answered his ring Philip ordered coffee for one and a whisky and soda. Then he drew up a chair.

"Where's Sandy?" enquired his aunt.

"I left her dancing at the club. She wished me not to disturb you."

"Sandy's very thoughtful. She wanted to stay with me tonight, but I knew you'd be looking forward to this last evening together. She's a dear girl."

"Perhaps not so tractable as you'd prefer to believe," he commented. "D'you mind if I smoke?"

She waved her permission. "What do you mean about Sandy? She's very fond of you."

"Is she? I sometimes wonder."

"Darling." Mrs. Tremayn laid her hand upon her nephew's. "You remember telling me before I met Sandy that she was sweet and unspoiled? She still is, Philip. Her sort are always shy with a man. You must treat her gently. Not rush things."

"I've known her nearly six months," he said.

"She's young. Give her time." Aunt Catherine smiled and playfully tapped the hand beneath hers. "You were always reckless as a boy, and rueing it afterwards. But it takes two to make a marriage. Sandy will be good for you, and you're much too handsome to be free."

For a while Philip left the subject and talked of other things. He enjoyed confiding in his aunt. She made him feel a much better man than he suspected he was, and she was always willing to believe that others were at fault rather than dear Philip.

It was after eleven when he suddenly noticed his aunt's travelling clock. He sprang up.

"I must fly, Aunt Catherine. I told Sandy I'd be only half an hour."

"Go at once. Thank you for coming, my dear boy." She received his kiss. "And, Philip, do keep in mind what I've said. Be very gentle with Sandy. Don't let your experience of other women blind you to Sandy's innocence. What you want of her isn't quite what you wanted of the others, is it? Remember that what she gives has never been offered to another, and if it isn't quite enough, be patient."

"You're a sweet," he told her. "If you weren't my aunt, I'd marry *you!*"

Philip drove back to the Club in an odd mood. Maybe he had been too impatient with Sandy. His aunt might be right. The girl was of different stuff from the sisters of his friends who considered a man a flop if he omitted to kiss them first time out. Still, she had promised, and he'd keep her to it. This hanging about was making the devil of a big thing of a mere kiss.

As he got out of the car a large blob of rain smacked on his nose and mounting the steps he felt another on his head. In the club foyer people were already hurrying into wraps and waterproofs.

"Dash the rain," a man growled. "You pray for it all the week and it has to come on a Saturday night, just when the party's heating up."

They daren't wait. Many of them had driven in from outlying farms and heavy rain upon the rough country roads might have marooned them there for the night.

Philip searched the ballroom and the buffet. The place was emptying so fast that he was afraid someone else must have offered Sandy a lift. Obviously, she was not in the Club, and no one he asked could remember having seen her during the last hour. Fed up and a little worried, he went back to his car, reversed and retraced the road to the Regency Hotel.

He had made a few enquiries at the reception desk and was back in his aunt's room when Sandy came in. To his mind her eyes were oddly bright; her hair was tousled and the skirt of the white dress was fanned with creases. She looked breathless, as though she had been running, but she said someone had brought her in a car.

"If you've only just got back," remarked Philip, "you must have been in the Club when I left. Where were you?"

"Now, Philip" - his aunt raised an admonitory finger. "It was my fault for keeping you here. It's not yet midnight. Take Sandy down to the lounge and have a little nightcap with her."

Out in the corridor, Sandy hesitated. "I'd rather not go down, Philip." Brin might still be there and to meet him again tonight would be anti-climax.



"Come into Aunt Catherine's sitting-room. She's too tired to hear us."

Softly, he opened the door next to his aunt's bedroom, and Sandy went in. He was standing behind her, looking down on the pale little curls which caressed the nape of her neck. He took her shoulders and felt that she was trembling, and in an uprush of genuine emotion he set his mouth to the curve of her neck. She went rigid, and his resolutions dissolved in anger.

"A promise is a promise," he said thickly, and swung her round to meet his lass.

Sandy made no protest. When he let her go she smiled at him, through pale lips.

"Good night, Philip," she whispered, and quietly left the room.

Back at Tegwani, Sandy was astonished by the growth of her garden in the short space of a week. Lantanas and jacarandas sent out their delicate new growth and the palms fanned huger than ever, the dust washed from the spears by a weekend of heavy rain.

For a few days Sandy was busy tidying her flower-beds and bushes, and training Mac in the things a household puppy should know. Then a batch of typing kept her within doors, while Aunt Catherine was immersed in her sketches.

Philip had driven the three hundred miles to Durban for his annual holiday. Aunt Catherine had demurred at his going off with a crowd of young men of dubious tastes, but, as usual, Philip had his way with her. He needed a break from Pietsburg, he asserted, and as she had just taken a short vacation he supposed it was useless asking her to go along.

So it was quiet at the little house in the veld. Because Aunt Catherine was so deep in her own pursuits, Sandy often had to lunch alone with the Major. The nice man always went grave with disappointment when he found Aunt Catherine missing, but inevitably good breeding had him smiling and gallant in a short time.

At one of these lunches Sandy learned that Brin intended to throw a *braaivleis*. She had heard of the nocturnal outdoor parties among South Africans, but had never been closely enough associated with a South African family to be invited to one.

"Next Saturday week, probably," the Major told her. "It has to be on a Saturday because Sunday is not much of a working day for farmers and planters. I've been to several such affairs. You and Mrs. Tremayn will enjoy it immensely."

"Brin hasn't asked us yet."

"One isn't invited to a *braaivleis*... one hears about it and goes. Brin and I mention it to everyone we meet and the word goes round to a couple of hundred people."

'What do we wear?'

"Almost anything. We gather round a camp-fire, toast sausages and sing songs."

"It sounds grand. Where will it be?'"

"Brin suggests the best position is down near his own timber lot."

"Must there be trees?'"

The Major laughed with slight embarrassment. "Apparently, in these parts, there must. People wander off for walks, you see?"

"Oh!"

Yes, Sandy saw. It sounded like something out of a book. She wished, though, that Brin would invite them officially. It would be awful to turn up and find themselves unwelcome among a crowd of merry-making South Africans. Of course, the Major would be there. Still, she would much rather Brin had asked them.

A few days later Sandy forgot all about the *braaivleis*, for Aunt Catherine slipped and put out her knee. She had set out before the sun sweltered, but when, the lunch hour had passed into early afternoon and heat shimmered over the distances with still no sign of her, Sandy grew anxious. She knew the water-hole, and made her way to it between the cactus and bush trees, trailing behind her one of the boys.

Towards the end of the trail they literally stumbled across Aunt Catherine. She was lying in the shade, her face pale and strained, and when she saw them she fainted. The boy was despatched to bring some companions and a hammock, and it was in this, slung between four boys, that Aunt Catherine made the journey home.

Afterwards, she laughed about it. She forgot the pain of her knee and the night Sandy sat up doctoring it with cold compresses. But even after the pain had gone the knee took a long time mending. The Major begged to be allowed to call a doctor but Aunt Catherine objected; strains always took their time to heal and she could feel this one recovering a little each day.

More than a week had passed since the Major's first mention of the *braaivleis*. Brin had ridden over to assure them that any help they needed was theirs for the asking, but he had stayed no longer than convention demanded, saying that he was busy with alterations to his house which must be pushed through while the weather was dry.

Sandy would have liked to know more about those alterations, but since Aunt Catherine's accident she never saw the Major alone.

On Thursday of that week Brin himself reminded her of the *braaivleis*.

It was early evening. Hoopoes dipped their exotic crests towards the trees beyond Sandy's garden, and a watchful jack-hanger strutted on the lawn. Sandy sat at a table in the stoep, reading and looking out occasionally over the green and gold country beyond the garden. She saw the car a long time before it neared the house and, recognizing it for Brin's tourer, she vacillated between going down to the gate to meet him and slipping indoors. Inclination won, and her work was set aside.

She reached the gate just as the car pulled up. Brin got out, smiling.

"Well met, child. How's the aunt?"

"Nicely, thanks. Are you coming in?"

"No need. It was you I came to see." He thrust open the gate. "Come outside and walk ... if you happen to be sensibly shod for a change." When she had joined him on the road he eyed her sandals with disgust. "You're the most hopeless of women. Don't you own a pair of brogues?"

"Yes, but they're ugly."

"Why should you worry? There's no one to see them, unless you count Kennedy... and me."

"I'm afraid I'm just not broguey."

"You ride, though. I've seen you out with the blond lawyer."

"I'm not good at that, either," she confessed. "Horses are such a long way from the ground."

He laughed. "You need confidence. The handsome Philip, apparently, is no riding-master." A tiny pause. "He must be missing you terribly. Does he write every day?"

"Not quite."

For a minute or two they strolled on in silence. Brin broke it.

"You're coming to the *braaivleis* on Saturday, aren't you ?"

"I'd like to, but I can't leave Aunt Catherine."

"Major Kennedy was sure you'd say that. Of course you must come. It's absurd to give up your fun for Mrs. Tremayn. She'd be the first to admit it."

"It was you who insisted that neither she nor I should stay in the house alone."

"Quite. And I stick to it. Kennedy has offered to keep Mrs. Tremayn company while you go."

"It isn't fair to let him miss it, for me."

"Don't worry" - sardonically. "He won't mind. I'll Call for you at about eight. And for Pete's sake don't rely on my apparel to keep you warm. I shall be wearing a bush shirt and shorts!"

She smiled, doubtfully. "I still think I should ask Aunt Catherine before arranging definitely."

Abruptly, he halted. " Don't you *want* to come ?"

"Of course, but..."

"Then stop dithering. The way you let others run your life makes me sick."

"You seem to forget that I'm employed here," she answered. "Goodness knows what I'd have done if Philip hadn't arranged for me to live with his aunt."

"His motive was not entirely disinterested," Brin said sarcastically. "Both he and Mrs. Tremayn get their money's-worth out of you. If Graydon hadn't brought you to Tegwani some other young hero would have taken you somewhere else ... you're that type of child. No need to swoon with gratitude to Philip." Impatiently, he turned back towards the house.

He said no more till he had slid back into the seat of his car. "So long, then, little one. Eight on Saturday. Tell Auntie that Uncle Brin will see that you don't eat too much or stray far from the camp-fire."

Smiling vexedly, she watched him go. His was the most baffling personality she had ever encountered.

Aunt Catherine was entirely in favour of Sandy's attending the *braai*. In fact, had Philip been at Tegwani, she would have gone herself. But it would be too embarrassing to ask Brin or the Major to half-carry her to the car, and she hoped a further opportunity might present itself later on. She would be quite content, she said, if the Major came to dinner and left early so that he need not entirely miss the party.

Accordingly, Brin and Major Kennedy arrived together at seven-thirty on Saturday evening. Brin accepted a cocktail and watched

derisively while Sandy sipped hers and took the last mouthful in a painful gulp. Critically, he approved the yellow sweater and green skirt, and then led the way outside to his car.

It was already dark. A slice of moon had risen above the valley, silvering the tree-tops and casting shadows. In its radiance, odd patches of bare sandy soil looked white, and cactus and red-hot poker trees threw grotesque outlines against the horizon. To the left, a single palm silhouette leaned gracefully, its banners waving gently in the night breeze.

Before its red glow was visible, they smelled the camp- fire, and soon Brin pulled in behind a queue of other cars.

"This is where we step out and walk," he said. "Don't get wind-up if a horse neighs close to your ear. There are sure to be several tied up among the trees."

He took her elbow and together they walked among dry leaves and twigs through a small wood of jungle denseness. Branches met overhead and drooped cascades of liana and convolvulus. Ferns sprouted in the path, and Sandy felt small monkey eyes watching her from above.

Then the trees thinned, with here and there the pale bole of a recent felling, and the flames of the huge camp-fire sprang out ahead. As they came into the clearing Sandy stood still for a minute, taking in the strange scene.

Men and women in bush clothes stood about holding tall glasses and talking fast. Boys served lager and soft drinks, weaving among the guests and seizing an empty glass as though their sole desire were to empty more and more bottles of Windhoek and Granadilla.

Brin began shaking hands and making introductions.

"*Verwelkom*, Coetzee. Miss Cunningham is English; Nels, Adriaan, Van Ruiter, Mrs. Van Ruiter ... Miss Cunningham."

Sandy collected a number of hefty handshakes and feminine smiles. *Ja*, Engleesh. She was little and fair ... Engleesh. *Brin* looked at her and winked.

"All right ?" he murmured.

Quivering with an inward excitement, she nodded. Already guests were squatting in a circle round the fire, tossing off the dregs of their drinks and disposing of their tumblers. Boys appeared, bearing great dishes piled high with raw sausages, the fat, meaty kind, and handing round long sticks with pronged ends. An appetizing odour mingled with that of the woodsmoke.

Brin said, "Get in here and do your stuff. Hey, Nels. See that Miss Cunningham uses her weapon right. I'm supposed to be host here, not nursemaid."

He disappeared, and Sandy found herself squashed between a young man in the usual khaki clothing and *veldschoen*, and his wife, a stolid, smiling creature without a word of English. Sandy was unaware that it is quite usual to find whole villages of white people in the bush who speak only Afrikaans.

She speared her sausage as the others did and held it to the flames. Talk was jovial and ceaseless, and though Sandy would have liked to know what it was all about, the smiles of those nearest her were kind and expansive, and included her. They were very anxious that she should be provided with drink and bread, and laughed uproariously when her sausage spat and leapt into the fire. Another was procured and a large horny hand secured it upon her fork. This one cooked beautifully and Sandy ate it sandwiched between two hunks of bread,



her feet drawn up, her eyes bright and her cheeks scarlet from the camp-fire.

When Brin came and sat at her back she turned to him, laughing her enjoyment.

Someone cried, "*Jou liefeling*, Brin?" and Brin laughed back, "*Wieken?*"

To Sandy he said, "They're asking me if you're *my* sweetheart."

Intent upon wiping grease from her fingers, she replied, "If I knew the language I would have answered that myself. Won't you have a sausage?"

Banter continued all round them. Brin toasted his sausages and joined in. He made Sandy eat another in true Boer fashion, and when lager was served again he insisted she try some of that, too.

In the leaping light he looked at her over the top of his tankard.

"Good. *Ja?*" he whispered.

"Marvellous. *Ja!*" she whispered back.

Presently he tweaked her hair. "They won't miss us. Come on!"

Gradually, he edged her round the group and towards the end of the clearing. A wide path opened before them and Brin guided her through its twists and bends to a sudden break of sky, and the river.

A path of wrinkled silver, cut by the moonlight along the surface of the water, drew Sandy nearer.

"I've never seen the river before," she said softly.

"It isn't much by daylight, and in high summer it vanishes altogether. This is by far the prettiest spot."

"Do you come here often ?"

"No reason to. I'd forgotten it looks so good by moonlight."

"The singing, too. Your people are grand, Brin."

"Not my people," he said with slight crispness. "They're mostly Afrikaners ... descendants of the Boers and Huguenots. Simple, unaffected working planters and farmers. The word boer means farmer. Did you know that ?"

"No." Her head lifted so that she might see his face in the darkness. "You're not an Afrikaner?"

"Do I look like one?"

"You don't look quite English," she said honestly.

"My father was English. My mother was born here of Scottish parents. She was South African."

Was it the extraordinary surroundings that lent a huskiness to his voice ? Sandy stayed silent, soaking in the wonder of this place ... shared with Brin. The faintest of winds whispered through the leaves; it caught a strand of her hair and carried it upward to touch his cheek. She felt him move against her shoulder, and for a palpitating moment recalled the savage kiss of weeks ago. He moved back again, and the tension slackened.

"You smell of woodsmoke, sausages and gardenia," he said casually.

. She laughed, with a sort of relief. "Thank you for my initiation into the *braaivleis*."

"It isn't over yet. Soon, they'll look at their turnip watches and wander in batches down to the house. In the hall and lounge they'll drink coffee and eat whatever's going, and finally, about midnight, they'll climb into their buggies and drive away. Shall we go back?"

Brin had timed their return just right. The party was ending with the usual *Sarie Marais*. The guests were Standing now, shouting the song at each other, waving stetsons, and stamping for emphasis. As the last note died the women smiled sleepily and gave their men little pushes. The younger men had slipped arms round their wives' and sweethearts' waists and drawn them away from the light. The fire fell together, flared, and began to die. It was a scene Sandy was never likely to forget.

She waited while Brin gave orders for the fire to be put out, and then, together, they followed the others. With perfect naturalness, his arm lay lightly across her shoulders.

Dozens of lamps must have been used to give so much light from the house, and hurricane lamps were set at intervals along the drive.

Sandy could not get inside the house. The door and hall were jammed with people holding large cups and munching sandwiches; so she sat upon the stoep wall, while Brin shouldered through to get her some coffee.

There was so much noise that she did not bother to look round when a car thudded up the drive, but she noticed others gesticulating, and could tell that someone well known to most of them had just arrived.

She straightened, craning her neck over a man's shoulder. The newcomer was a young woman. She stood, slim and vivid, on the top step, her light coat hung carelessly upon her shoulders over a scarlet suit. Her sleek black hair, plaited in a crown round her head,

enhanced her gipsyish, red- lipped beauty. She was greeting everyone by name, in ringing Afrikaans.

As Brin's big figure reappeared, Sandy's attention automatically switched to him. She saw him catch sight of the woman and smile suddenly.

"Katrina! How in heaven's name did you get here ?"

A few men moved off down the steps, allowing Brin to stride forward and grasp the two extended hands.

"How good to see you," Katrina said. "But I'm so disappointed not to have got here in time for the *braaivleis*. When we got your letter I had to come. I remembered your last *braaivleis*, nine years ago, on my eighteenth birthday."

"You haven't missed all of it. Our friends here will be glad *to* meet you again." He noticed the car on the path. "Did you drive all that way alone? Katrina, you're incorrigible!"

The woman laughed, as though at a compliment. She hugged Brin's arm with both of hers.

Sandy became aware that a house-boy carrying coffee and a plate of sandwiches was trying to draw her attention. The "Baas" had sent him. She took the cup, stepped backwards to her perch on the wall and tried the coffee in small sips. The loveliness of the evening melted. All she wanted now was to go home and slip between her sheets.

She heard Brin say, "Where's Sandy? Ah, here you are. Sandy, meet Katrina Felsted. Sandy's living over at the bungalow for a while, Katrina. I told you it was tenanted. You'll probably see more of each other."

Katrina turned on the dazzling smile. "So you have come to one of our parties. Do you like South Africa ?"

Before Sandy could reply the other looked past her.

"Mr. Foord! And Johanna. Don't tell me you're married at last! Well, well ... it's about time." and she carried on in the tongue which seemed to come easier.

Brin bent over Sandy. "The Major has just turned up. You won't mind if he drives you back, will you? I'd no idea Katrina was coming and I shall have to take her into Pietsburg and try to get her fixed up at an hotel... though she wouldn't care if she had to sleep on the veld! I'd ask you to wait, but you're looking tired."

"I am, a little," she said with an effort. "I'd like to go now, Brin. Thanks very much for asking me."

He accompanied her down to the Major's car and said good night.

As they moved off, Sandy saw Katrina standing at Brin's side, among their friends. She looked entirely a part of the place. Pressing back the hair from her temples, Sandy caught the odour of the smoke which had seeped into her clothes. Tomorrow, she would wash the sweater and shampoo her hair ... and hang out the skirt in the sun.

## CHAPTER SIX

PHILIP returned from his holiday full of a proposition put to him by a real estate man he had met in Durban. In a few months' time this man would be needing a partner who could put a little capital into the business, and Philip had taken an option on the partnership.

"It would mean dropping the law as a profession," he told his aunt, "which is a big step. I can't do it without your approval."

Though she had always felt that some time a decision of this sort would be asked of her, Mrs. Tremayn was disturbed.

"You know nothing about real estate, Philip."

"I'm well up in the legal side, which, after all, is the most important. Clarkson knows the rest. It's an interesting business, Aunt Catherine."

"And you really feel you'd be happy in it?"

"A man is always happier working for himself. And life is much more fun in Durban than in Pietsburg."

"I don't like Durban."

"You will, darling, when we share a nice little house in the Berea."

His aunt's smile was hesitant. "Have you told Sandy?"

"Not yet. It rather depends on you, doesn't it?"

"She ought to have some word in the matter of where she's to live."

"Am I to take it that if Sandy agrees, you will, too?"

"I'd rather not face the upheaval of removing from Tegwani until my book is finished. In fact, I shall be truly sorry to leave the place at all, especially now that we have a garden and the timbered ceiling. Sandy has taken so much trouble over all the rooms. But if you really feel you'd be happier in Durban in this real estate business, you must buy the partnership and I'll follow when I'm ready."

"Couldn't you finish within the next two or three months?"

"One can't hurry my *sort of* work, my dear. We'll go into it more thoroughly after we know Sandy's reaction."

Sandy was reluctant to express an opinion. Since Philip's return she had noticed a renewal of the old unsteadiness in him. While agreeing with Aunt Catherine that it would be a pity to leave the house they had made so comfortable, she yet felt that if Philip removed himself to Durban, he would need both herself and his aunt within visiting distance. Otherwise, in his leisure hours, he would inevitably gravitate towards other distractions.

Lately, the responsibility for Philip's happiness weighed upon Sandy's conscience. At times it seemed almost too much for a girl barely twenty. Philip, ten years older and a man, had come to rely too much upon his womenfolk, simply, thought Sandy, because they were both of the gentle, home-loving type and only too ready to bear with his moods and coax back his gaiety.

Was she the right kind of girl for Philip? Wouldn't someone a little more worldly have handled him with more wisdom and firmness? And wouldn't Philip have respected her for it? Half the trouble was her own distaste for plain speaking on the subject of his weaknesses. If she could have put her arms about him and said, "Dearest, it hurts me dreadfully when you drink too much," he was sensitive enough to feel badly about it. With all his faults, Philip's innate decency died hard.

Instead, she relied on a tacit loyalty and affection. He *felt* her goodness and trust, but feeling was not enough. So, when the fellows invited him into a game of cards and opened a bottle of whisky, he put Sandy and his aunt from his mind, and joined them.

Since the advent of Katrina Felsted, Mrs. *Tremayn*, Sandy and Philip had several times been invited to dinner at the farmhouse. The Major always made a charming sixth. Without question, Brin occupied the chair at the head of the table and Katrina the one at the foot.

"I always said this house needed a woman," Aunt Catherine playfully told Brin one evening. "Katrina makes an enchanting hostess."

"But I am a guest!" Katrina flashed the brilliant smile. "I sit here because Brin and I are related. Very distant cousins. Brin is my nicest relation, aren't you, Brin?" She pronounced it "Breen".

He grinned. "That's the sort of statement I never contradict, especially when the flatterer is a good-looking woman."

At these dinners he wore evening dress, in deference, Sandy presumed, to Katrina's sparkling creations. Katrina, with her rich olive skin and sleek black hair either plaited round her head or parted in the centre and drawn back into a looped knot in her nape, wore scarlet, or emerald or sapphire, and tinted her lips and nails a dark ruby.

Everyone enjoyed these occasions but Sandy; she was too conscious of the limitations of her wardrobe. Aunt Catherine, still limping just enough to rouse the Major's concern, used his arm from the dining-room to the chesterfield in the lounge. Philip was attracted to the colourful Katrina like a moth to a flame, though he never sought her out between visits. A little of Katrina Felsted went a very long way with Philip.



The disposal of the other couples left Sandy open to the teasing and cynicism of Brin. Once, when they were seated side by side in the lounge, he reminded her that only four months of Aunt Catherine's lease had still to run.

"After that, I suppose, you will both chase after Graydon to Durban ?" he enquired, a sarcastic twist to his mouth.

"It's quite likely we shall," she replied off-handedly.

"Tenacious child," he remarked. "You'll have both hands full with Philip. Has he asked you to marry him yet ?" When she did not answer, he added in a lower tone, "You're frightened, aren't you?"

"Frightened ?" Her chin went up. "Of course not. Why should I be?"

"When a girl answers 'Of course not' to that sort of question, she means 'Yes, terribly.' "

"You're talking from experience of your own kind of woman. You don't know me."

"Perhaps I know you better than you think. I'll admit you're more complicated than" - his hand waved towards the other side of the room - "than Katrina. But Katrina's the most sensible woman I know. She sees what she wants and goes after it. Her mentality is clear-cut, almost simple. It would never occur to her to try to reform a man. Yet she is older than you and has considerably more knowledge of men."

Sandy did not doubt it. Sophistication and self-assurance were the qualities one noticed first about Katrina ... after her astounding, dark-eyed beauty.

Philip chose that moment to put on a record.

"Brin, may we throw out the rugs ?" cried Katrina.

"Why ask me?" he countered. "You'll do it, anyway, if you want to dance."

It was the easy intimacy of his attitude towards Katrina that pained Sandy. Not, she told herself hastily, that she coveted that same intimacy. But it was a side of him that she had not known existed, that she felt certain he reserved for Katrina.

Philip and the other woman were dancing now, his light, springing hair not so far above her black, shining head. Both of them were smiling and, when Sandy slipped a sideways glance at Brin, he, too, looked amused and interested in the spectacle of two people of such diverse good looks gliding round the centre of his floor.

"Sorry I can't ask you to dance," he said. "But you shall have your turn with Philip when the time comes." He turned upon her a long, speculative stare. "How do you like the house now it's altered?"

"Much better. Your new tapestry chairs are lovely ... and the cream curtains. Did you choose them?"

"When I was in Rhodesia the Major sent me some catalogues. Katrina selected what she thought looked and sounded appropriate and later I drove into Pietsburg and made the final choice."

"What did you do with the cowhide?"

"Relegated it to the new veranda. It looks well, there." He wrinkled his nose at her. "You hated this lounge before, so I had to do something about it. It's true" - as her face expressed disbelief. "The first time you came here you looked so utterly out of place that I knew the house was all wrong."

"More likely it was I who was all wrong."

"Maybe you are the other extreme from cowhide," he conceded, "but you made the whole place look positively backwoods and much too male. Why the frown ? Ought I to have sought your advice about the furnishing ?"

Sandy hadn't known she was frowning. Her forehead smoothed. "Hardly," she answered, sharply for her. "I'm chintzy-wintzy, if you remember."

"Between us we might have got somewhere," he suggested casually. "The dance seems to have ended and another begun, for here comes your swain. Treat him gently, little one. He looks exalted."

Brin, his brows raised in mockery, left her with Philip and strolled across to Katrina. As she danced, Sandy saw Brin pour drinks and touch glasses with the dark girl. They laughed and chatted, and Katrina actually forced him to try a few dancing steps with her.

"Tired, my sweet ?" asked Philip.

"Would you mind awfully if we go soon ?"

"Not a bit. If Aunt Catherine's not ready, Major Kennedy will bring her. I never seem to get you to myself these days."

Brin came out with them to the car. "Sorry you've a headache," he said to Sandy, obviously disbelieving the excuse. "Don't let Graydon keep you up too late."

Sandy murmured good night and settled into her seat. She was weary of Brin's jeers and Katrina's apparently flawless personality. As they drove between the trees she hoped a long time would elapse before they were invited to the farmhouse again.

From Oom Jannie, Sandy learned that Katrina and her brother owned a farm near Bulawayo. The brother had just married - Brin had

attended the wedding during his visit and Katrina thought that now she was here she might as well give her sister-in-law plenty of time to settle to the new life.

"I think Miss Katrina will stay in Pietsburg a long time," Oom Jannie volunteered. "Last year she came when the citrus was big and stayed for the harvest. This year the fruit is only just set, but she will stay again till the harvest. You will see."

"It is odd that a girl so beautiful should remain unmarried," Sandy commented.

The old man shrugged. "Brin also is not young, and neither is he married. *Sometimes* I think the same reason will do for the two of them. They are in love."

"If they are, what is to stop their marrying each other?"

"Miss Katrina had a lover who died, four years ago. Perhaps she has only just got over the grief. That is what Brin is waiting for."

Oom Jannie's reflections spread themselves over the past and future, while Sandy wondered about Katrina. One could feel sorry for a woman who had tragically lost a lover. Brin, apparently, was content to wait till she was again ready to contemplate marriage. He might have loved her for years, when another man had held her heart, and now had accepted her friendship, hoping it might ripen into the love he needed.

The following Friday a boy came down with a note from Brin, asking them to a dinner-party for the Saturday. It was early evening, and Philip, who had just arrived, was given the note to read.

"Brin throwing house-parties is something new," he observed. "I suppose half the Afrikanders in the district will be there. Want to go, Sandy?"

Mentally, she had been calculating how many times, she had worn the white dress and how many the green, at Brin's house. If this was to be a big affair Katrina would appear in a new and even more startling get-up, and Sandy did not feel equal to an evening in such splendid company where she herself would appear like a jenny wren.

So she took her cue from Philip's tone, and answered, "I'm not keen. We shall probably feel out of it."

"I think that, too. I know what we'll do. Tomorrow night we'll make for that club the other side of Fort Cradock. I hear it's lively there."

Aunt Catherine, pleased that Philip could so lightly turn down a chance of seeing Katrina, decided to write Brin that they were unable to accept his invitation. After all, he had left it rather late.

After dinner, Philip began talking about his proposed partnership in Durban. The man had sent letters and credentials and he wanted his aunt to look at them.

"Bring them into my *room*, dear," Mrs. Tremayn said. "I'd like you to go through my box of papers at the same time. You come, too, Sandy."

Sandy demurred. They could talk more freely alone, and she had a perfectly good book to read.

The novel was one she had read before. It was difficult to procure up-to-date literature out here, and she couldn't afford to be on someone's book list. Sandy opened it and stared at the page, blankly, without interest. She felt uneasy, almost unhappy, yet she could think of no

cause for such a mood. Life was no different from a month ago, when she had throbbed with excitement and pure pleasure at the *braaivleis*. In fact, it held more promise - a future in the green and white city of Durban. Philip, at last within sight of leaving the work he loathed, was more content. She should have been happy.

She moved, and the book snapped shut. Perhaps a breath of night air would soothe this restlessness in her.

Slowly, she moved along between the potted palms towards the opening into the garden. And there, in the stone archway, she came face to face with Brin. The meeting, sudden and unexpected, forced from her a small exclamation.

"Did I startle you ? Sorry. I could see you walking along the stoep as I came up the path, and imagined that you'd heard the car. Are you alone ?"

"Aunt Catherine and Philip are looking through documents and things in her room. Shall I tell them you're here?"

"Not yet."

She had backed into the stoep and he followed her, touching her arm to make her stop when they reached a wicker divan.

"Sit down a minute and smoke a cigarette with me."

Mechanically, she sank down, pulling aside the skirt of her striped cotton dress as he lowered himself beside her. The cigarette between her lips, she bent to his lighter. She puffed a tiny cloud of smoke, and looked up to see why he still held the flame near her face.

"You look miserable," he said abruptly, into the darkness.

"You didn't come here to tell me that," she returned, not too evenly. "Something much more important must have dragged you from your house after a hard day's work."

"I don't believe I had a definite reason for coming. It's been a rotten day for me - one of my boys got killed by an ox-cart and two others injured - and the Major is spending this evening in the *rondavel*, writing letters. I suppose I drove over for something to do."

"No Katrina today?" she queried coolly.

"She stayed in town. She'll be disappointed you can't come to her birthday dinner tomorrow."

"I... we didn't know it was Katrina's birthday."

"Would it have made any difference if you had?"

"I don't think so. We'd feel awkward with your friends, and they with us."

"I can't see it," he said bluntly, flicking ash beyond the knee of his trousers. "You were happy enough with Coetzee and the Van Ruiters at the *braaivleis*."

"Perhaps if we could speak Afrikaans..."

"I'll teach you, if you like," he suggested.

Sandy was silent. Her heart had quickened and she could feel a small pulse beating in her throat.

"If Philip can get along on English, I can," she managed. "It's kind of you to offer, though."

"I offered out of charity, not kindness," he said brusquely. "I suppose it's natural to feel sorry for a young thing hemmed in by other people and her own inhibitions. A new language opens up new friendships and, in my opinion, that's something you're badly in need of. Katrina agrees with me."

Sandy cooled, though her knees still quivered. So they'd been discussing her, like a child or a guinea pig. "Is that why you've been asking us over just lately ... giving the little English mouse a break ? Well, neither you nor Katrina need bother with me again. I, for one, shall be relieved not to have to sit through another evening of your mockery and cynicism..."

Unconsciously, her voice had risen. Roughly, he gripped her arm.

"You're strung up, and no wonder. Day after day alone with Mrs. Tremayn, hacking at a typewriter or digging about in the garden when it's much too hot. Not a soul you can have a straight talk with ... unless you count Gray- don, and I don't believe you do. You've taken on a job that a much older woman might quail at, and it'll get you down. D'you know what I think..."

Sandy jerked to her feet, her face white. "I'm not interested. Ever since we came you've resented our living on your property. You believe that because your grandparents pioneered this country you're entitled to despise everyone who isn't as you are ..."

She couldn't go on. Brin had leapt up and was grasping her shoulders, squeezing them hard to still their trembling. His eyes burned down at her.

"Stop it, do you hear! Hysteria won't -help you. If you get satisfaction out of calling me names, go ahead and do it."



"It would take more than names to get behind your conceit," she flashed huskily. "Let me go."

"Not till you stop shaking. Look here, little one, I'm going to open Mrs. Tremayn's eyes to the muddle she's making of your life by coercing you into a responsibility for that nephew of hers. The whole plan was thoroughly inhuman." His breath came hot and angry upon her forehead. "No one can *force* two people to care for each other."

Sandy, bewildered and desperate, a bitter ache in her throat, pressed back the shoulders he still held. "She didn't have to force us. We were ... attracted before I knew Aunt Catherine."

His hands dropped. "Are you trying to tell me that you're in love with Graydon ?"

"I'm telling you nothing. It isn't your business."

"If you love him, why aren't you happy? Love works miracles, you know" - he was jeering now. "I'm sure all your romantic books have told you that. Is it the fact that you haven't supplanted the whisky bottle that hurts? Did you honestly think you had a chance ?"

"It can't matter to you what I think. Go back to your orange trees. You have more understanding of them than of women."

Swiftly, she turned, but in a couple of strides he was ahead of her, barring her way.

"Tell me something, you little mule. If you were free and unfettered by financial worries, would you go away from Tegwani... leave Mrs. Tremayn and Philip?"

She looked up at him steadily, saw the bold arrogance of his features and the white collar of his shirt lying open to reveal his strong brown throat.

"No," she answered. "No, I wouldn't."

This time he made no attempt to stop her going.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

PHILIP was singing and strumming an accompaniment on the new piano.

Sandy was sitting cross-legged on the floor, reseating a grass stool through which Philip had jammed his foot. Another month had passed, and Philip was due to leave tomorrow for his new business in Durban. A week ago he had put the legal profession behind him, bought a new car, and arrived at Tegwani ahead of a small lorry which carried the piano. He'd always fancied a piano, he said, and Sandy might like to amuse herself with it during his absence. It was typical of Philip that he should purchase a car and a piano before tables and chairs.

He bent over and tickled her cheek. "Sure you've remembered to pack everything ?"

"Your room is bare and the trunk is full."

"Sorry I'm going, Sandy ?"

She hesitated, and Aunt Catherine supplied an answer. "We're both sorry and glad too. We shall miss you so much at the weekends."

The comment did not satisfy Philip. He gave a light tug at a strand of the honey-pale hair.

"Do you wish you were going with me, Sandy ?"

Aunt Catherine laughed softly. "Don't embarrass her, dear. Take her for a walk and ask her all those questions without a third person present."

Sandy set aside the stool and hank of grass and allowed Philip to pull her to her feet. As they went outside he kept an arm about her and

when, eventually, they were among the karri and wild fig trees beyond the garden, she felt his face turn towards her hair.

"You're awfully sweet, Sandy, and so shy. Answer me now. Would you like to be going with me ?"

"Yes," she said, without emotion. "I think I should. I shan't be sorry when your aunt has finished her work here."

"It's less than three months till her year's lease expires. You must make sure that she doesn't renew it."

"What makes you think she might want to ?"

"I don't know," he said musingly. "Aunt Catherine has never taken to bricks and mortar before. She nearly fifty, you know, and it's possible she's feeling the need of a permanent home."

"She'll have to look elsewhere than Tegwani ... unless she marries Major Kennedy."

He was startled into halting and staring down at her. "Is it really a possibility ? I've only considered it as a joke."

"Aunt Catherine has no thought of marrying, but it would be nice for them both, wouldn't it ?"

Philip's expression was not agreeable. It occurred to Sandy that the idea of being supplanted by the Major in his aunt's affections was distinctly distasteful to him; he might even be considering such an alliance from his own financial viewpoint.

Then his smile came out. "She isn't the sort to marry so late in life," he said confidently. "If she did, she'd leave the poor old Major flat within a year while she went hunting flora in the Amazon, or somewhere."

Sandy was leaning against the trunk of a tree, and her fingers reached for a bunch of large red berries. Her face, raised to the task, was grave with concentration. Philip's brown eyes were suddenly dark and purposeful. He took the berries from her and threw them down; his hands slipped along her arms and drew her to him, roughly.

"Kiss me, Sandy," he muttered urgently. "No, not your cheek. It's your lips I want. Sandy, kiss me."

He was clasping her tightly, his mouth hard upon lips that resisted, before her tenseness gave way to some sort of surrender.

When he held her away from him her lashes were wet.

"You mustn't cry," he said. "I'll be everything you want, Sandy. I won't drink, I swear it. I know I've said that before, but this time I mean it. I do love you so much ... more than I ever loved any woman. You must believe that, my sweet, and trust me."

Afterwards, Sandy could not remember what reply she had made, nor why tears had sprung into her eyes during Philip's kiss.

He kissed her again before he left next day, a quick, rather furtive embrace in front of Aunt Catherine. Then he said goodbye to his aunt, gave a last look over the baggage in the back of his car, and slowly took the road out of Tegwani.

It was about a fortnight after Philip had gone that Major Kennedy decided to take a holiday as soon as his crop was in.

"Some relatives of mine have come from England to Cape Town and I am thinking of spending a month or two with them in the off season," he told Mrs. Tremayn. "Which means that you may stay on in this house without fear of inconveniencing me ... unless you wish to renew for another year?"

"No ... no." She was almost agitated. "It's difficult to know what to do. I have never so enjoyed living in a house before, nor done so little work in the course of months. I love my flowers as much as ever, but I don't find the same joy in writing about them."

"Perhaps your nephew's change of career has upset you ?" he suggested gently.

"It's possible," she agreed with a sigh. "And there's the matter of his marrying Sandy. I wish they were officially engaged. I do like my ends tied."

"Then you'll stay on after the year is up ... if only for a month or two?"

"Would Brin consent to that ?"

He smiled. "Brin and I have come to an arrangement. When your lease ends this house will automatically become mine, so that you will be my tenant, not his."

"He's actually *sold* to you ?"

"You may put it that way."

"What's happening to the man! He wouldn't consider selling to me on any account. Was it because I'm a woman ?"

"Not entirely. He has agreed to my taking the whole of the tobacco plantation and this house on a lease which should easily cover the rest of my life. Eventually, of course, both will revert to him or his heirs."

"Of course," she echoed drily. "Brin couldn't completely let go of *anything* that belongs to him."

"So I may be sure of finding you here when I return from Cape Town ?" the Major insisted.

"I don't know. It may be safer to say that if circumstances force me to go I will let you know at once."

With that, the Major had to be satisfied.

Sandy, from the window of her bedroom, saw his soldierly figure swing up into the saddle and turn to canter back to his men.

Ten minutes later a small car pulled up at the gate. It had arrived from the direction of Tegwani House, which was possibly the reason why Sandy took a quick look at herself in the mirror before going out to meet the slim young man who was coming up the path.

Though he wore a grey lounge suit and a felt hat, she was sure that he was not English. Yet his accent, when he diffidently addressed her, was impeccable.

"Are you Miss Cunningham? I hope you won't mind my calling to make your acquaintance. Brin Masterson told me you live here, I called at his house with a message from my father and we got talking ... May I introduce myself? Paul Adriaan."

Sandy nodded and smiled acknowledgment.

"Your father coached me in Pietsburg for Cape Town University," he said. "That was before you came to South Africa. I owe him very much. My people are farmers here. Brin told me you met my father at a *braaivleis*."

She laughed. "I lost my first sausage and he fastened my second for me. How good of you to call. Will you come in ?"

Paul was the pleasant, studious type. To Mrs. Tremayn and Sandy he confided that he was home on vacation. In a few months he planned to marry a student he had met in Cape Town and together they were going to South-west Africa, where teachers were much needed. His father, naturally, was disappointed in his choice of a career, but there was another brother far better suited to the land than Paul.

Politely, he refused tea. Brin had just served him a huge lunch and Miss Felsted had persuaded him to drink wine, to which he was unaccustomed.

Sandy spared a few minutes to reflect that Katrina had come every other day during the last month. She wondered what they talked about, and whether the woman would ever go back to Rhodesia. Was she still holding Brin off with the old griefs and cleverness ? And Brin. How was his intolerant nature reacting to the procrastinations of Katrina ?

The next time Paul Adriaan came he had remembered Sandy telling him of her interest in South African songs and had brought with him a small Afrikaans text-book. Aunt Catherine, wrinkling her nose at it, left them alone in the lounge.

"I'll go through the pronunciation with you, and you must learn the words before I come again," he declared. "Say them after me."

Smilingly, she obeyed. "*Blou... dou... goed... schoen...*" and so on, for half an hour.

Then Paul looked at his watch. "My mother is out visiting and I promised to fetch her at nine-thirty; but we have time for a song, if you will play, Sandy ?"

She opened the book of music. "Which one ?"



"Have you learned the words of *Sarie Marais* ?"

"I can't vouch for the accent."

"Sing it to me, and I'll join in the second time."

Unselfconsciously, she played the introductory phrases, and the words came, without too much difficulty, for she had practised them during his absence.

She sang clearly, enunciating the Afrikaans in her best English style. Looking up at Paul, who was leaning against the piano, she noticed him smile at someone who had just come into the room, and guessed that Aunt Catherine had been attracted by the music.

Paul joined in, his voice unobtrusive at first, then swelling into the rhythm of the song as their tones fitted together. Just for the fun of it, as they neared the end she slowed, and used her fingers with a flourish. On the last note she drew back her head and laughed.

"Heartrending," stated a clipped voice, just behind her.

In one movement she twisted and stood up. "Brin! I thought it was Aunt Catherine."

"So Paul has you singing in Afrikaans?" he queried sarcastically. "Congratulations, Paul. How many sessions has it taken to teach her *Sarie Marais* ?"

"This is the first time she's tried."

Sandy closed the piano and moved away from it.

Paul apologized. "I'm afraid I must leave now. I have to pick up my mother from the Van Ruiters. Don't bother, Sandy. I can find my way out. Thank you for a lovely hour. Good night."

"Afrikaner schoolmasters are a change from fair young Englishmen," Brin said conversationally, when Paul had gone. "Perhaps I ought to warn you that they're not nearly so impressionable."

"It isn't necessary." She was rearranging a bowl of flowers on a small table. "Having been away so long Paul finds himself without friends here and at a loose end rather often. We've told him to call whenever he likes."

Brin had reached for the textbook from the arm of another chair. "So he's teaching you his mother tongue? Certainly he's more competent to do so than I am, but I seem to remember that when I offered to act professor, English alone was good enough for you."

She answered quietly, "You can't resist jeering, can you? Why won't you treat me as you treat Aunt Catherine?"

"Because, little one," he replied with deliberate softness, "you're less than half her age, uncommonly pretty, and pronounce my name in a way that both annoys and pleases me. Also - and this is quite important - I happen to be a man." His grin mocked. "Which doesn't let you off explaining why it is that with me you're conscious of your inhibitions."

At last she met the steely eyes. "Do you dislike me, Brin?"

"A little, at the moment."

"Because I refused to let you teach me Afrikaans and accepted lessons from Paul?"

"Hardly. Perhaps I'm not in the mood for women tonight. You haven't answered my question. Why am I the bear in your neat little garden?"

Ever so slightly, her lips quivered. "You're not, but if you weren't so contemptuous of... of people like me, I shouldn't want to close up against you. You *can* be patient and friendly... but not often."

Cynicism and amusement blended in his glance. "I wonder what you expect of a man ... Graydon's blond fascinations and the diffident respect of men like Paul Adriaan ? How young you are."

To Sandy the conversation had become distasteful. His mood was obstinate and unyielding, and she hated the patronage in his tones.

"Will you have a drink ?" she asked.

"Drink and cigarettes. How would we ever wriggle out of tight corners if they didn't exist? No, I won't have a drink, thank you. I'm going home."

He stood and stared at one of Aunt Catherine's water- colours which Sandy had recently framed. When he turned, she was hesitating near the door, and he came across and bent his baffling smile upon her.

"Looking forward to Durban ?"

"Yes," she answered stiffly.

"Not a qualm?"

"None."

"Liar," he whispered, "you're scared pink." He paused, thrusting a hand into his breast pocket for his cigarette-case, and added carelessly, "Maybe some day soon I'll decide whether to spank this foolishness out of you or kiss sense into you. Good night, child."

As he went out into the night he was actually whistling.

Sandy was still in the same position, near the lounge door. She was remembering how Brin had looked those last few moments, and the extraordinary sensation which had pulsed through her veins. She had wanted to lift a hand and smooth away the lines of mockery at his mouth. Her throat had contracted with an undeniable emotion, a need that dazed her with its intensity.

Mechanically, she skirted the room, drew aside a curtain and peered out. Brin was just getting into the car. He seemed to be talking to someone and grinning in the subdued interior light. Sandy saw the other occupant of the car straighten from a lounging position, negligently pluck the cigarette from Brin's lips and place it between her own. Katrina.

Sick and trembling, Sandy let the curtain fall. She knew now why Brin's jibes hurt so much. She, Sandy Cunningham, was in love with him.

The shattered feeling persisted for several days before Sandy began to get used to the idea of loving Brin. It must be love, the bruised sensation whenever she thought of him, the intolerable ache in her heart when she imagined him with Katrina.

At once she realized the hopelessness of being attracted to a man so ruthlessly self-assured. In his arrogance he could not help but be contemptuous of her romantic idealism, for no two people could differ so much from each other as she and Brin. She was easily wounded, but it was impossible to penetrate Brin's formidable independence of spirit. Not that she wished to try. It was safer to attempt locking away own hurt and need, and to concentrate on a future in which Brin had no part.

After all, there was her duty to Aunt Catherine, and to Philip. The projection of herself married to Philip might have provided a fresh twist to the knife had there been no Katrina. But the dark girl with the

glittering smile did not allow one to forget her for long. Three or four times every week she was at the farmhouse and occasionally she stayed so late that Sandy, slipping from her bed in the darkness to flick aside a curtain, saw Brin driving her home at midnight. He would have to care a great deal for a woman to drive a hundred miles for her sake in the small hours.

Yes, there was plenty to torment herself with. Perhaps it was a beneficent fate that chose just this time for the borer beetle to get busy upon the waxed floorboards of Aunt Catherine's workroom.

It was Sandy, mending a small tear in one of Aunt Catherine's net curtains, who noticed the tiny white mounds of sawdust in a corner of the room where a mop seldom reached.

"Are these something to do with your plants?" she asked Aunt Catherine.

"No." Mrs. Tremayn leaned down and wiped her finger over a couple of the mounds. "I'm afraid it's borer beetle. Brin will be annoyed."

"Is it our fault?"

"I don't see how it can be. We didn't ask in the little pests. Oh dear. I suppose that means I shall have to clear out of this room while the floor's treated."

"What with?"

"I forget the name of the stuff. Brin will have some."

"Aren't we the Major's tenants now ?"

"Yes, but we can't write to him in Cape Town about it. Will you send a boy down to get a bottle of the beetle destroyer ? And then, I suppose, we shall have to transfer my things."

Sandy did not send the boy to Brin, but to Oom Jannie. He came back with a gallon can of pungent-smelling liquid and instructions to wash all polish off the boards with strong soda water and let them dry before saturating the wood with the solution.

It was a knee-cracking, back-rending job, the patient spreading of the liquid, two or three brushfuls to every few inches and extra splashes where the borer holes showed up; the room was easily sixteen feet square.

About half-way through Sandy's fingers tingled; a little later they itched and smarted. In her zeal, she had taken no thought for the fact that if the liquid was death to borer beetles, more than likely it was not too good for the skin; her hands were as soaked as the floorboards. Too late, she sought out a pair of rubber gloves. By the time her operations reached the door, Sandy was rocking on her heels with the pain of her hands.

The warm, soapy water in which she washed them seemed only to accentuate the burning ache, and by the afternoon both palms and nearly all the fingers had become violently inflamed and white blisters were forming. Aunt Catherine was frightened.

"We shall have to call Brin," she said. "He'll know what to do."

"He's busy. I'll try them first with vaseline."

But vaseline only increased the swelling and the pain. Now, the blisters were twice the size and had a tender, watery look.

So, against Sandy's wish, a boy was despatched to the farmhouse with a note from Aunt Catherine. Less than half an hour later Brin was unwrapping the hands close to the light from the dining-room window. By now, Sandy was too weary with the pain to notice the sudden tautening of his jaw, but she heard his exclamation and felt

the contraction of the arm which he had slipped about her while his other hand peeled *off* the adhering bandage.

"Who plastered them with grease?" he demanded quietly.

"I did. The skin was so dry and tight."

"Don't you know that grease is fatal to burns?"

"I ... I didn't know they were burns. I ought to have had the sense to ... to wear gloves and use a long-handled brush."

"Even if you'd immersed your hands in penta-chlor it shouldn't have done this to them," he said with a cold anger. "Where did you buy the stuff?"

"Uncle Johnny sent it up, in a can."

"I'll go into that later," he promised grimly. "You'll have to go to a doctor in Fort Cradock."

"No... please..."

"What else can I do? A woman's hands are important. Can't afford to risk blemishing them."

"You treat your men."

"It's hardly the same. These burns are bad. I shouldn't forgive myself if my handling of them left scars."

"Please, Brin."

He drew a sort hard breath. "All right, but I've never doctored a woman before. Take a peg of whisky and clench your teeth. I don't mind telling you that if you scream I shall walk straight out."

His touch was gentle. She sat upright, scarcely daring to breathe lest he mistake an exhalation for a murmur of pain. He did not look at her till the final end of bandage was secured over the tannic acid dressing. Then he gave her a curiously tight-lipped smile.

"Good girl. Do you want to cry now?"

She leaned back, her eyes dark in the pallor of her face, and contrived an answering smile.

"It's too late. Thank you very much, Brin."

He gathered the soiled dressing. "I'll go and wash my hands and tell the girl to make you some tea."

Through the window Sandy saw two plump little pigeons and a hornbill in the grass at the side of the house. South African birds never seemed to be hungry; they never pounced for crumbs and bits of fat like blackbirds and starlings in England, and their chests were so round and smooth that one longed to stroke them.

Brin brought the tea himself, set the tray near her on the table in the window space, and sat down on the opposite side of it from her.

"Plenty of milk and no sugar, isn't it? Will that do?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Tell me when you're ready to drink it. I suppose a cigarette is a little beyond you. Mind if I have one?"

She shook her head. For Brin to ask permission was a new departure.

To end a small silence, she said, "We were afraid you'd be furious to know that we'd let the floor get borer beetles."



"I might have been, if you hadn't confronted me with your hands at the same time. That rather stole the importance from a few miserable insects. But why, in heaven's name, did you have to do the work yourself?"

"A boy might not have bothered with the whole surface, and I should have had to stand over him to see that the brush was pushed as far as it would reach under the skirting boards."

"Thorough young woman, aren't you ?" - tersely. "I bet you inspected all the other floors as well."

"I did." She smiled faintly. "Was it the wrong solution I used ? Won't it do the trick ?"

"It should! I had a look at the can just now. It's crude, undiluted stuff that we use outdoors against termites...the sort of poison Oom Jannie should have kept under lock and key."

Interpreting his frown as censure against the old man, she said quickly, "He probably sent it by mistake."

"When mistakes cause injuries like yours ..." He broke off abruptly. "Have some tea now?"

"I'll call the girl."

"No, let me do it for you." He was up, standing slightly behind her shoulder and holding the cup to her lips. Aware of her embarrassment, he observed, "If my hands were in the condition of yours I'd be shouting hell into someone." Then, as he replaced the empty cup, he added, "My word, what a take-away! I'd like to see you do that to a Martini."

He was still behind her, and now she felt his hands close over the fine bones of her shoulders. His face lowered till his cheek was alongside

hers, almost touching, and she had to close her eyes and steel herself against trembling at his nearness and his particular fragrance. Slowly, deliberately, his lips pressed against the fine hair that slicked back from her temples. Her pulses throbbed, and she fought a blind impulse to turn and meet those chiselled lips.

After that he must have straightened, for she could no longer feel his touch. When he came back to the other chair he smiled down upon her bent head.

"One always makes a fuss of hurt children," he said, without expression. "I'll tell your girl to clear these things and leave you in peace to rest. Is the pain going?"

"I ... think so." Which pain, she queried to herself dazedly, the physical... or the other?

"Good. I'll be over early tomorrow."

Somehow she answered his good-bye. Her relief to be alone mingled with an inexpressible yearning. Though the pain in her hands was still acute, it faded to the back of her consciousness when she thought about Brin.

He had scarcely argued when she had begged not to be taken to Fort Cradock. Had her confidence in him called to some deep-rooted instinct, or - she wondered painfully — had he weighed up the fact that the drive to Fort Cradock and back would eat up the rest of his day? His gentleness had surprised her, but it could be explained by his assertion that he had never doctored a woman before.

And what had prompted the kiss upon her temple? Sympathy? Mockery? a blend of the two? So different from that other kiss, yet just as devoid of real warmth and — feeling. There was that in Brin which remained remote, whatever the circumstances. His emotions, if

he had any, he kept well battened beneath the hatches of his self-control. There was no reaching him... at least, for Sandy.

Brin came two mornings to dress her hands. On the second he was in a hurry. As they looked like healing without much trouble, he said, it might be tomorrow evening before he'd call again.

But the whole of the next day passed without a visit from him. Sandy, having wrested a tenuous happiness from the daily contacts, went to bed desolate and wide-eyed. Hours passed before she slept, and in the morning she awoke feeling slack but slightly buoyed by the knowledge that this was another day, and Brin was sure to show up.

In the middle of the morning the girl announced "Mees Felsted." Katrina came in, a hint of concern muting her usual brilliant smile.

"Your poor hands! How horrid for you. Brin asked me to call. He had suddenly to drive into Pietsburg yesterday and may not return till late tonight." She opened the huge bag which was slung over one shoulder. "I've brought you a new supply of dressings, and a book. It's one of half a dozen that Brin gave me for my birthday, so I'd like it back when you've read it. May I have some scissors?"

"Scissors?" Sandy hoped antagonism had not sharpened her voice.

"Brin told me to dress the burns for you. I've done some nursing."

"I'd rather you didn't. My hands are almost better."

"Really? Good." Some of her exclamations were quite mannish in tone. "You don't look well, though. Perhaps it's shock. Sure you wouldn't like me to have a look at your hands?"

"It isn't necessary, thank you, Katrina."

"I expect you felt as though you could have strangled that old man."

"Uncle Johnny? No, I've hardly thought about him. Everyone makes mistakes."

Katrina's brows lifted. "I don't think I've ever seen Brin so angry as when he dismissed Oom Jannie."

"Dismissed him!" Sandy sat forward, staring bewilderedly.

"It was the only thing to do. The man must be beyond work or he'd never have made so foolish an error."

"But what will he do? He's been with Brin for years and he's too old to start again with someone else. He's fond of Brin."

Katrina smiled. "Brin was fond of Oom Jannie till this happened. You needn't worry about the old Dutchman. His salary for the last fifteen years lies at the bank, untouched."

"He's alone," Sandy said, feeling wretched. "He's the sort who'll pine without an interest and a job. I wish Brin hadn't done it."

"No one can teach Brin his business. By now you should have realized that he won't tolerate incompetence. It was the only thing to do."

"Then you agree with his action?"

"Entirely. One can't run a plantation on sentiment."

"It's hard, though, if a little humanity can't be allowed to seep in sometimes," Sandy was stung to retort. "If I'd suspected Brin would take it out on Uncle Johnny I should never have called him."

"And you'd probably have scarred your hands irreparably by soaking them in grease."

So Brin had told Katrina about it. Probably they'd laughed together over her stupidity.

On a weary note she reiterated, "I wish I'd known Brin had it in his mind to dismiss Uncle Johnny."

"You couldn't have stopped him... in that mood."

"When was it?"

"The day you sent for him. I was at the farmhouse when Mrs. Tremayn's message came; in fact I shoved the surgical box into the car, but he wouldn't let me come." She laughed a little. "He said that one pretty girl at a time was as much as he cared to handle and, anyway, he wanted me there in case he should send for something. He came back in one of those nasty quiet rages of his, told Oom Jannie just what he thought of him and kicked him out." Katrina finished with a smile almost of relish.

Sandy turned away her head. "Poor Uncle Johnny."

Idly, Katrina's ruby finger-nail picked at the arm of her chair. "It must be difficult for a girl of your upbringing ... and from England ... to understand a man like Brin, or a woman like me. We're conditioned by the life and environment. That's why Brin and I never get tired of one another. We know each other, and dovetail."

"I suppose you do. I've known very few South African men."

"One can see that. But they're not all like Brin; they haven't his fanatical sense of property."

"Fanatical?"

Katrina shrugged. "It amounts to that when a man demands perfection in everything he owns; flawless fruit from symmetrical rows of trees, only the finest sun-ripened leaf from his tobacco. To some extent he has even carried it into his private life. At some time or other he has even pictured his perfect woman, but dealing with human nature isn't quite the same as handling trees. You can't prune a woman into perfection." Her smile was secret, knowledgeable. "Once he's admitted that to himself he'll make rather a wonderful husband ... certainly an exciting one."

Sandy, inarticulate when confronted with so much experience, could only move uneasily in her chair and wish that Katrina would go. Oom Jannie had hinted that Brin had loved this woman possibly for years. Was Katrina aware of that. or was the position not quite so simple ? Perhaps only recently, since Katrina had come to Pietsburg, had Brin seen in her a potential wife ?

"As soon as your poor hands are better," Katrina was saying, "we'll take the river trip up to Uisthage. No Afrikanders, I promise you, unless you would like to invite Paul Adriaan as your guest. What about your Philip? Is he becoming prosperous in Durban ?"

"He writes cheerfully," said Sandy with an effort.

"If you love him, marry him," advised Katrina with the hard emphasis Sandy disliked. "Brin thinks him not good enough for you, but I consider it wrong to make such distinctions. We are none of us saints." She slipped the strap of her bag back over her shoulder and stood up. "I must leave you now. Let us know how the hands progress, won't you?"

Sandy stayed in the lounge for the rest of the morning. "Let *us* know how the hands progress," Katrina had stated, allying herself with Brin and the farmhouse. It seemed that the two of them discussed her freely, as though she were some phenomenon within their circle; a

pathetically romantic little English girl, the self-appointed guardian angel of a good-looking bounder.

For a few days life was nearly unbearable. Then her hands emerged from the bandages and the tender new skin hardened and paled in colour. Brin slipped in for five minutes, expressed relief that the incident had ended without serious consequences, and went off again to supervise the lorry loads which were leaving his sheds.

Paul Adriaan came to say good-bye before going to Cape Town to marry his Ginette, and voiced the hope that she would continue to read and practise Afrikaans.

Now that there was little else to take her mind Sandy began to worry about Oom Jannie. Since Katrina's call she had had no chance of a private talk with Brin and, in any case, doubted whether she had the power to persuade him to reinstate the old man. But the thought of Oom Jannie alone and unwanted in the little shack on the hillside across the valley roused her pity. It was possible by now that Brin regretted his summary treatment of his old friend, but his principles would prevent his climbing down to the extent of offering to take him back. If Oom Jannie were the one to ask, though, wouldn't Brin regard the matter with more magnanimity ?

The old man, also, was not without pride, and Sandy could see him obstinately refusing to beg Brin for the withdrawn friendship. She wondered what she could do about it, and concluded that a talk with Oom Jannie was indispensable before any action could be taken. But the shack was eight miles away.

A boy was sent on a donkey with a note and he returned with the envelope still intact, though somewhat crumpled, and the information that Oom Jannie was *not* at home. Oh yes, the old baas had been there this morning, for the brick fire was still warm, but the door was bolted. Sandy's enquiry as to how he knew the fire was warm elicited

a bland smile. The boy had felt the blackened bricks on the outside wall.

He made the journey three times before returning, at last, at the tail of Oom Jannie's mule.

The old man was quiet. In the back stoep he accepted a mug of coffee and a slab of fruit cake, and Sandy saw him glance furtively at her hands.

She spread them before him, smiling. "Quite better, you see? And much softer than before. I wish you had come to see me at once, Uncle Johnny."

"I was ashamed," he said frankly. "I told the boy to fill the can with penta-chlor. He mistook the tank and sent the other. I should have filled it myself. When Brin came back so angry" - a helpless shrug - "what could I do? The fault was mine. You'd trusted me and my carelessness had injured your gentle little hands. I deserved Brin's fury ... and to lose the friendship of you both."

"What nonsense. I regarded it as an error on your part and didn't blame you in any way. I've made a good many silly mistakes myself!"

"You didn't blame me?" he echoed incredulously; and then, "No, of course ... that is like you, Miss Sandy. You would forgive almost before you are wronged. Brin was angry enough for two."

Sandy paused. "Maybe he's over it now. Why don't you go back to him, Uncle Johnny?"

The man threw out a hand. "Brin sacked me ... phut ... like that. He can do without Oom Jannie."



"I wonder? He relied on you for so many things, and you were such good friends. Don't you think he might be sorry now that he sent you away ?"

"He would not admit it."

"He might, if you approached him diplomatically. Friendships like the one between you and Brin can't break up over a simple mishap to - a stranger. Won't you please go and see Brin, Uncle Johnny ?"

The old man's smile faded; he held his beard. "It was he who cast the hard words, Miss Sandy, not I. If Brin asks me back I will go, but I will not beg of him."

"Won't you do it for me? I hate to be the cause of trouble between you."

"You are not the cause. I am getting old and lazy... that is the cause."

From this frame of mind Sandy could not budge him. Half an hour later Oom Jannie trotted back to his hillside home, leaving Sandy completely undecided as to what to do next. An instinctive distaste prevented her from begging Katrina to use her persuasions with Brin, and at the moment Aunt Catherine was too engrossed with the last chapters of her book to give a careful opinion on anything but wild flowers.

For the rest of that week Sandy waited for a chance visit from Brin that did not materialize. On Sunday morning she dressed in pale blue linen, told Aunt Catherine she was going to take a long walk, and set out for Tegwani House.

The road, wide and shadeless. had softened, and oozed in tarry streaks beneath a glittering white sun. Away on either side bottle brush and short thick pines knit together in a barrier on the edge of

the green-crustured veld. The air was odourless and charged with sultry heat, and Sandy began to question whether tackling three miles on foot just as the sun was getting into its stride was not just a little unwise.

When Sandy came within sight of the house the queer reluctance which had dragged at her for the last hour increased in intensity. The white gables and brown thatch rose so splendidly from the palms and jacarandas, and as she came up the drive the cool expanse of the new veranda invited graciously. It was a house to catch the heart, and hold it.

The main door stood open, secured, not by a polished log or other frippery, but by a simple drop catch on the back of the door. Sandy, her hand upon the carved teak knocker, was seized with sudden shyness. Supposing Brin were in one of his moods, how would she deal with him ... or, more likely, he with her ? He was capable of bundling her into a car and sending her home again, but she didn't think he would. Nevertheless, her fingers withdrew from the knocker, and she moved along to the corner of the veranda and sat in one of the cowhide chairs. It might be as well to recover a little before tackling him.

Presently, she heard voices; Brin's and that of another man, an Afrikander, and ... yes, Katrina's. They were below in the garden, apparently just round the corner of the house, for Sandy could not see them though they sounded quite close. Her impulse was to fly back to the path and disappear among the shrubs, but her knees were suddenly weak and jumpy, and she was afraid of betraying her presence. So she stayed there, tense and nervy.

Katrina's laugh trilled out. "What did I tell you, Conrad ? You should know that with Brin, everything waits till the harvest is over."

"But marriage is not a recreation," came the slightly alien tones. "Even Brin might take time off for that. Aren't *you* in a hurry, Katrina?"

Sandy could almost visualize the shrug with which Katrina replied.

"What is the use, when all depends on Brin? Sometimes I hate you, Brin."

"Do you, little cousin?" - on the familiar mocking note. "That's not really important so long as you love me again afterwards. I asked Conrad here this morning to discuss business. If you'd stayed away till after lunch we'd have got through it without interruption."

"All right" - airily. "I owe the Coetzees a visit, anyway. I'll ride over and plant myself on them for a nice Dutch midday dinner. Good-bye, you two."

The slim figure swung across the grass right in front of where Sandy sat. A whistle from Katrina brought her horse cantering across the pasture alongside the garden. Like a boy, she vaulted into the saddle, tugged the rein, and sent the horse galloping among the trees.

Sandy guessed that the men, also, had been watching Katrina's expert handling of her mount, for now that she was out of sight talk began again, but the subject was irrigation and fertilizers, with a slight digression into house building.

Jealousy was a quality which she despised, yet, as it rose in her, she could do nothing to stem the tide. Katrina was too much a man's woman; she could join in all their pursuits and still remain beautiful and desirable. The hard glitter did not deter men; doubtless they considered it natural and necessary in her sort of woman.

Unutterably weary, Sandy stood up.

Brin's voice came suddenly loud. "Have a drink before you go, Conrad ?"

"No, thanks, I'm late already."

"You'll send a boy up to Oom Jannie? Just have him tell the old chap that I asked for him to turn up for work tomorrow morning."

"Oom Jannie will be pleased."

Brin laughed self-consciously. "I was mad as hell when I sent him off. It must have been the sight of that child's burns."

The other sounded amused. "Only an English girl would do such work herself rather than detail a boy to do it. Are those two women vacating the house yet ?"

"Soon, I hope. I'd like to get Major Kennedy fixed up well before next planting season. He's a fine chap."

"Good-bye, then, Brin."

"So long."

Sandy's heart was beating up in her throat. So this morning's plod through the heat had been pointless. Not only had she overheard a conversation that reiterated in her brain with the sickening throb of hammer-strokes, but, without any prompting, Brin had retracted his dismissal of Oom Jannie. She swallowed to ease the constriction. If only she had stayed away and saved herself this new, tearing pain.

Slowly, she made her way along the veranda. Impossible to face Brin now.

But a boy appeared from the front door and beamed at her. "I tell master."

Brin was inside the hall, lighting a cigarette. He came out and stared at her, frowning.

"How the deuce did you get here ?"

She gave him a brittle smile. "I started out for a Sunday morning walk and grew thirsty. Your house was nearer than ours so ... I came here for a drink."

"You *walked*! No wonder you look played out. Sit down." He pushed a hall chair closer to her and told the boy to bring lime juice and water.

Sandy ignored the chair. Her chin went up. "I'm quite all right. When I've had the drink, I'll go."

"I'll drive you."

"There's no need," she said stiffly.

He looked at her keenly. "Annoyed with me over something?"

"No."

His mouth drew in as though he were about to make a sharp rejoinder. But the tray of drinks arrived and he poured for her. Their fingers brushed.

"You're cold," he said. "It's not lime juice you need but hot coffee. I'll tell my boy you're staying for lunch."

"Don't. I'm going back."

As she raised the glass her wrist trembled. When she had sipped a little he took it from her and set it down. Then his fingers slipped

beneath her chin and held it steady while his critical gaze roved her face. In sudden, unreasoning anger, she twisted away from him.

"I'm sorry I had to bother you this morning," she said in a tight voice. "I'd prefer to walk back."

"You can't do that," he answered coolly. "If my presence has become so unbearable I'll get a boy to drive you. Stay here till you see a car out on the road."

Abruptly, he left her. Sandy grasped the back of a chair; her shoulders shook. All she wanted was to get away from his farmhouse and its wounding associations.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

THE day Aunt Catherine's book was finished she looked really deeply unhappy for the first time since Sandy had known her.

"I suppose it's like a child growing up and away from you," Sandy said sympathetically. "The book is still part of you, but from now on it leads an independent existence."

"It isn't that." Aunt Catherine gestured a trifle wearily. "The work has been a burden; I'm thankful to be through with it. But now I feel lost. Always before, as I neared the end of one book another began to take shape in my mind. This time I'm completely blank; in fact, I shan't mind if I never use my pen again."

"You'll get over it," Sandy comforted her. "In Durban new ideas will come. I hope you'll let me go on typing for you."

"Of course, dear," she said, but without enthusiasm.

Sandy parcelled the manuscript, and Aunt Catherine hired a taxi to collect them for a long weekend in Pietsburg. This time there were no parties, no Philip or Major Kennedy to dress up for. Aunt Catherine bought a new trunk to hold an accumulation of linen and other oddments acquired during her stay in the district.

When they came back to Tegwani she wrote to Philip, telling him that she and Sandy would be ready to travel within a month. His reply, which arrived some days later, announced that he would be coming down to see them very soon. Cold at heart, Sandy waited.

Katrina came over and again suggested the trip to Uisthage. She would invite some English friends from Pietsburg and they must make a big thing of it; dinner in the huge hotel among the pines, dancing, and back along the river by moonlight.

Aunt Catherine, a little on edge and anxious for diversion, accepted for both of them.

"I know you were on the point of refusing," she said later to Sandy. "Was it because you need a new evening dress?"

Sandy nodded. That was as good an excuse as any.

"Then we'll buy you one; a warm colour this time. Yes, I insist" - as Sandy's lips moved in protest. "You've helped me so splendidly in every way ... typed, and kept house a thousand times better than I could have done it myself." Her face crinkled a little sadly as she went on, "Sometimes I wonder if I've been fair to you, Sandy, keeping you here away from friends and the bright life that every young thing has the right to expect."

Sandy bent over Aunt Catherine's chair and kissed her cheek. "This has been the most wonderful year of my life," she said quietly. She might have added, "and the most agonizing".

Aunt Catherine smiled. Sandy knew that her thoughts had leapt to Philip.

About once a fortnight the Major wrote a polite little note from Cape Town. Meticulously, he enquired the health of "the ladies" and slipped in an enquiry as to how the book was going. Aunt Catherine had been undecided as to how to reply to these epistles, and consequently had waited five weeks before acknowledging the first two. Now, Sandy begged her to let the Major know that they expected to leave Tegwani fairly soon.

"You did promise him you would," she reminded her.



"I know, but perhaps it would be more ... well, conventional, to wait till about a week before we go. I shouldn't like him to think he has to break his holiday especially to say good-bye to us."

"He's been a charming and considerate friend," insisted Sandy, "and I believe he was sincere in wishing us to stay here till he returns. I think he'll be hurt if you give him short notice."

"Do you?" Aunt Catherine's brow puckered anxiously. "He is rather sensitive, isn't he?" Then she shook her head quickly. "Still, I think my way is best. He may quite voluntarily end his holiday before we leave."

In a very few things, and this was one of them, Aunt Catherine could be adamant. Sandy, seeing that there was no moving her, resolved that if Aunt Catherine persisted in her refusal to acquaint the Major with her intentions, she herself would write him a few lines.

The new pastel peach chiffon dress, ordered from a gown shop in Pietsburg, was the loveliest Sandy had ever possessed. It seemed a pity to wear it the first time for an occasion which promised to be half-picnic, half-river trip.

Katrina showed unusual excitement over the affair.

"Brin thinks me mad," she said, laughing delightedly, "but I tell him it is all for little Sandy ... a treat after the poor burned hands."

"Is ... he to be of the party?"

An exaggerated shrug. "Who knows? He says not, but I say his curiosity will make him come. He likes English parties."

"Curiosity ?" Sandy echoed in a flat voice.

"Didn't you know Brin was curious ? But he is ... very, I've known him to create a situation merely for the pleasure of watching people's reactions."

"It sounds a little cold-blooded."

"Perhaps he is, and so am I. Mrs. Tremayn says you have a new dress. May I see it ?"

A little more cold-blooded curiosity? Sandy wondered. She sent for the dress and listened coolly to Katrina's cry of pleasure and her assertion that it was "sweetly, girlishly pretty."

Since the harrowing experience upon Brin's veranda the *other* Sunday *morning*, Sandy had seen him only twice. The first time he had cantered along the path at the back of the house and saluted her in passing. On the second occasion she was down near the *sluit* exchanging remarks with Oom Jannie. Brin had stopped his car on the road and walked across to them.

"Miss Sandy was saying the *sluit* needs clearing," the old man told Brin. "Shall I put some boys on it?"

"Why wait to ask me?" came the cold reply. "It should never have been allowed to clog with weeds."

"Isn't this included in the Major's land ?"

"Only the house and tobacco acreage are the Major's.

Get down to it right away, Oom Jannie, and set the filters working." Brin turned towards Sandy. "Asking for more trouble?" he demanded curtly. "Don't you know better than to stand about in the hot sun without a hat ?"

Wordless, she started walking towards the house. Brin was at her side.

"Look here," he said. "Isn't it time we ventilated this grievance of yours? If you can't stand the sight of me I've a right to know why."

"I'm sorry," she answered, not much above a whisper. "I... haven't a thing against you, Brin."

"Then what is it?"

Staring ahead, she said, "I think I'm getting tired of Tegwani."

He countered swiftly. "You've always said you loved the place."

"I'm only a woman" - with an attempt at flippancy. "You won't hold it against me if I change my mind."

He was quiet so long that she stole a sideways glance at him. It told her nothing. The silence lasted till they reached the shade of a Cape chestnut, when he stopped, more or less compelling her to do the same.

"So you really will be glad to leave Tegwani for the bright lights of Durban?"

Avoiding his discerning grey gaze she replied, "I need a change."

"Six months at the coast and you'll yearn to be back."

"I don't think so. You won't remember it, but when you brought me here that first time you said that my best bet was to marry in Pietsburg, and play bridge every afternoon with the other wives..."

"I didn't know you then."

"You weren't far out." She managed the quick smile. "You saw at once what it's taken me a year at Tegwani to realize."

"Suppose we stop romancing," he inserted bluntly. "Suppose we both swear to tell the truth for the next ten minutes?"

The smile froze. "I am telling the truth," she said. "More than anything I want to get away from Tegwani."

He drew a sharp breath of disbelief. "You mean that nothing I could say would keep you here ?"

"Nothing." A lie, but she had to hang on tight to her pride.

Almost, he swung away from her, but before he had taken a pace he checked and turned back. "Tell Mrs. Tremayn that as soon as she is ready I'll make the arrangements for the transport of her furniture. If she needs accommodation for the last few days there's plenty of room at Tegwani House."

With an abrupt good-bye he left her. Draggingly, Sandy went into the house and looked round for a job that would occupy the whole of her mind and energy.

The time hung leaden. Each morning she awakened weighed down by a sense of impending disaster which, as the hours passed, lessened into a dull, insistent ache.

The day of the river party broke as sparkling and effervescent as Katrina's smile. It had been arranged that a boy should drive over in Brin's car to pick them up at about six-thirty, so that it was still light when Aunt Catherine and Sandy took turns with the bath and began dressing. But by the time they were ready a warm dusk blanketed the veld, and when the car took the last bend to Tegwani House the lights from the windows flooded out into a starlit darkness.

Katrina herself met them on the drive, a dazzling figure in stark black and white with ruby ear-rings to match her lips and nails. Tonight she favoured the Grecian knot in the nape of her neck. The slightly foreign features, smiling with disguised excitement, made her mysterious and fascinating.

As they mounted to the veranda she squeezed Sandy's arm. "This is a special night. We want it to be one that you will never forget."

In the hall, Brin was pouring drinks for the half dozen or so English visitors from Pietsburg. Katrina made the introductions and then waved a hand for silence.

"Now comes the moment... a grand one for Sandy."

Sandy was conscious that Brin had straightened, glass in hand, and was watching her. The lounge door opened. She felt a sick jolt at her heart and nothing more.

"Philip!" cried Aunt Catherine. "How simply splendid."

He came forward, blond, smiling, absurdly handsome. "Somewhat theatrical," he commented, "but it was Katrina's idea. How are you, darling?" - a touch of his lips to his aunt's cheek. "And you, Sandy?"

For a frightening moment Sandy thought he was going to kiss her. But after the first movement towards her he contented himself with grasping her two hands and holding them wide, so that he could stand back and admire the new dress and her pink cheeks.

"Prettier than ever," he said softly. "Glad to see me, Sandy?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes of course."

"Come over here." He drew her to a hall seat and sat sideways, looking at her. "We've such a lot to talk about that I don't know

where to begin. And you're so sweet that I don't want to begin at all, but just to feed my hungry eyes on you."

"There must be plenty of nice girls in Durban," she said hurriedly.

"There are, but you're different, just like a breath of England. I wish I could stay until you and Aunt Catherine are ready to leave."

"Can't you?"

"We're so busy." His smile widened. "I'm making lots of cash, my sweet. But," his tone lowered, "I'm not telling Aunt Catherine just yet. I need the money she promised us when we marry to help expand the business. You see, we're planning to buy a large chunk of land along the coast and carve it into lots ..."

Sandy nodded, without listening. Brin sat across the hall talking with two men. She could see the hard jut of his nose and chin against the cream wall. From the fact that he wore a dinner-jacket she gathered that he was going up river with the party, though it was possible that he had dressed to receive the guests. She counted them, six women and ... yes, six men, if one included Brin. It was going to be a ghastly evening. Miserably, she wished that Philip, Aunt Catherine and herself might steal away home.

"Last drinks," Katrina announced. "It's time we started."

At Brin's landing-stage a launch swayed upon the black waters, and the party crowded into it, laughing and exchanging facetious comment. Within the next hour everyone learned a good deal about everyone else, and when the small illumined jetty of Uisthage appeared most of them had reached first names with the rest.

It was over coffee that Sandy noticed Philip's flushed face and unsteady hand. For a long minute she was swamped by a tide of

despair and defeat; the whole heartbreaking problem of Philip swept in, crumbling her defences. During his absence she had persuaded herself that a new environment and freedom from an office desk was filling all his needs.

With a tremendous effort she overcame the revulsion. "Shall we go outside for a breath of air before dancing?" she asked him brightly.

He seemed on the point of refusing, but as Sandy rose the other men stood up and Philip, perforce, had to do the same, Sandy knew that eyes from both tables followed them as they threaded the dining-room to the glass doors, but she was beyond caring what any of them thought ... even Brin.

In the grounds she took Philip's arm and led him to talk about his work. But he said little and when, ten minutes later, they had returned to the terrace, he slipped down on to one of the log benches, pulling her to sit beside him.

"This is *our* party, Sandy. Katrina arranged it specially for us. She wrote and told me that you'd looked desolate since I left. Were you unhappy for me, Sandy ?"

"I missed our weekends together."

"So you should!" he exclaimed. "I've found a house right in the best part of Durban with a colossal hotel a few yards away and the beach almost at the doorstep. Plenty of fun right on the spot. Life was meant to be enjoyed, Sandy, not plodded through."

The night air had steadied him. He laughed easily. She felt his arm slide along the back of the seat.

"Shall we go in and dance ?" she suggested.

His head twisted her way. In the darkness she could see shining points in his eyes. "You haven't kissed me yet. I suppose I ought to be glad you're not the kiss-and-come-again type. You might relax, though, with me. A fellow shouldn't have to beg for kisses from the girl he's going to marry." His arm tightened across her back. "A kiss for hello, Sandy, before the others come out."

Taut with distaste, she suffered the embrace. The moment he released her she sprang up. Ten yards away to the back of them Aunt Catherine stood with Brin.

Philip said, "It seems we had an audience. Were you looking for me, Auntie?"

"Not really, dear boy." Aunt Catherine smiled up at him as he approached and laid an affectionate hand for an instant on Sandy's shoulder. "But since you're here, perhaps you can tell Brin just when you'll be ready for us to come to Durban. He has kindly offered to take the removal off my hands."

"Any time," shrugged Philip. "We can all live together till I manage to fix you up with a little flat of your own." He glanced at Brin. "You'll be glad to have your property to yourself again, Brin. By the way, I hear from an old colleague of mine that you've transferred the title of the other parcel of land out near Fort Cradock to Katrina Felsted. Do I take it that she's staying in these parts?"

"She certainly is," was the brief reply.

Philip grinned. "It wouldn't be a marriage settlement, would it?"

"That may be the legal term. Out here we simply call it a wedding gift." Brin got out cigarettes. "Smoke ... or are you dancing?"



He hadn't looked at Sandy. As she and Philip moved away her knees were trembling.

By midnight, when the party had to finish, Sandy was spent, emotionally and physically. On the way back down the river, while the others sang, she sat between Aunt Catherine and Philip, completely silent.

In Brin's lounge his boys served drinks and savouries to the exuberant crowd and when at last the cars began to leave, Brin and Katrina stood together on the road, waving them off.

Katrina flashed her smile upon Sandy. "Have you liked your English party? They are nice, your people. Perhaps before you leave Tegwani we can do this again."

"You're awfully kind," Sandy murmured. "It's been marvellous."

"And now, Philip," cried Katrina, "take your little girl home. She is worn out with dancing and happiness."

Perhaps, thought Sandy, as she lay back in the car, the anguish and sense of loss would diminish in time. She certainly couldn't go on burning herself up at this rate.

Philip had decided that ten days was the longest he could stay at Tegwani. The Friday before he left quite a large batch of mail came to the house in the veld. Laughing, he brought the pile in and dropped it in the centre of the dining-table.

"Shall I sort them out? Here we are. One for you, Sandy. One, two ... five for Aunt Catherine, and three for me."

Sandy's came from Paul Adriaan. He thought she might like to know that he and Ginette had been married and were due to leave any day now for South-west Africa. He wanted to thank her for all the very

pleasant evenings during his vacation and he hoped she was keeping up the Afrikaans, both by textbook and in song.

"Here's a bit of good news," said Philip. "We've arranged the sale of one of the largest hotels in Durban. What a break! I did the groundwork for that."

The expected complimentary remark from Aunt Catherine did not come. Sandy raised her head. Aunt Catherine looked odd and flustered. The sheet of notepaper she held quivered and she had apparently gone back to the beginning to read it all over again. Philip, too, was struck by his aunt's lack of response.

"What's the matter?" he enquired jokingly, "has your publisher decided to halve your royalties, or to double them?"

"This ... isn't from my publisher." She laid the letter flat, on the table. "It's such a complete surprise that I can't quite take it in."

Casually, Philip moved round the table and leaned over to read the letter. His aunt was too bothered to stop him. Sandy saw Philip's face harden and lose all its charm. His mouth thinned into a line.

"Very touching," he said, and walked out.

Aunt Catherine's wince of pain wrung Sandy's heart. "Can I help?" she asked quietly.

"Did *you* write to the Major, Sandy?"

"Yes. Was it presumptuous of me ? I only told him that the book was finished and that we might be leaving soon."

"He ... he's answered. He's asked me to marry him."

"Why, that's lovely!" Sandy reached over and gripped Aunt Catherine's fingers. "But hasn't he been a slowcoach?"

Mrs. Tremayn smiled, a little tremulously. "You sound as though you've expected it."

"In a way, I have. He admired you and the house from the beginning. I felt sure he wouldn't like to contemplate taking on one without the other. You're going to say yes, aren't you?"

"I ... think so." She paused, creasing the letter between nervous fingers. "Why should it upset Philip? This can't possibly affect my love for him. He must know that."

"Deep down he does know it. He'll come in and apologize soon, you'll see. Aunt Catherine" - she hesitated - "does the Major say when he's coming?"

"His train leaves on Monday and he's due in Pietsburg early Thursday morning. He says" - fresh colour swept up into her face - "he says he'll call for my answer on Thursday evening."

"I'm so glad," Sandy said softly, "so very glad."

Leaving Aunt Catherine alone to assimilate her news, she went outside to find Philip. He was lounging in the divan on the front stoep, his letters balanced on crossed knees, his glance resting moodily upon the wild figs beyond the garden fence. She leaned back on the stoep wall, regarding him. From his expression she gathered that her task would not be easy.

"I'm sure you didn't intend to hurt Aunt Catherine just now," she began. "She and Major Kennedy really do care quite deeply for each other. I've known it a long time and hoped it would come to this."

"Spare me the sentimentality," he said. "I'm not in the mood for it. I thought Aunt Catherine had more sense than to tie herself to a retired army officer and a tobacco plantation. I suppose she's flattered."

Anger flared in Sandy. "That's beastly of you! You've always pretended to be fond of her..."

"So I am!"

"Then prove it by showing pleasure that this happiness has come to her. She has lived alone so long, and worked so hard. You can't grudge her this joy so late in life."

"She hardly knows the fellow," he hedged.

"During the past six months the Major has been here almost daily. Can't you see how ideally matched they are ... or are you allowing selfishness to blind you?"

Sullenly, he stared up at her. "What do *you* hope to get out of it?"

"Possibly, in the long run, I shall lose by it." Purposely, she softened her voice. "Philip, please go in and be nice to Aunt Catherine. You mean so much to her that if she sees you disapprove she'll be wretched. You wouldn't like her to guess that you're viewing the marriage from your own financial end?"

He didn't deny it. "If she marries the Major, she'll put him first."

"He doesn't need her money. While you need it, it's yours; you know that. You've hurt her, Philip. Please go in to her."

Still frowning, he collected his letters and stood up. "I wish Aunt Catherine had never come here," he said with venom. "This ridiculous house has got into her bones."

He kicked open the door and disappeared.

Sandy gave a long, shivering sigh. It had taken this incident to disclose his selfishness at its meanest and cruellest. She could hardly bear to think about him, so she went the back way to the kitchen and told Adam to make some tea. When it was ready she carried the tray into the lounge.

Aunt Catherine was alone there, ostensibly sorting over some old manuscripts, though Sandy suspected that she had suddenly gone busy at her entrance.

"A cup of tea is just what I need," she said gratefully. "Isn't it funny how in a crisis ... and this is a crisis for me, Sandy ... one always resorts to a cup of tea? Philip won't want any. He's answering letters in his room, and took a drink with him. You were right about him. The dear boy came in and apologized very generously. I suppose he was a little shocked. He was unaware that we knew the Major so well... and after all, I am fifty."

"How does it feel," Sandy asked, a smile at her lips and a spear at her heart, "to know that wedding bells are just ahead?"

"Don't tease, and please don't tell Katrina and Brin just yet; my wedding bells, my dear, are not quite so close as yours, because I shall flatly refuse to marry the Major till you and Philip are settled in Durban. My only regret is that you'll be living so far away. I really don't know how I shall get along without you."

Sandy set a cup of tea near Aunt Catherine and took her own over to the window. Gazing out at the dying English flowers she thought back to more than a year ago, when she was first confronted with the necessity to earn her own living. If only she hadn't so much for which to be grateful to Aunt Catherine... and Philip.

The following day Philip departed for Durban. At the last moment he effected a reconciliation with Sandy. It had been caddish, he admitted, to place his own interests above his aunt's happiness, but as his interests were Sandy's, too, she mustn't blame him.

"You'll admit that it was disagreeable news ... for the time being, anyway," he said. "But Aunt Catherine insists that she won't marry till you and I have tied the knot, so we're more or less in control."

"The Major may have other ideas," Sandy answered coolly.

"If he has, my sweet, we shall have to put our heads together." His easy smile came out and he leaned forward to tickle his nose with her hair. "Why shouldn't we be married soon, Sandy ? What are we waiting for?"

"You've left it late for that sort of discussion," she told him, drawing away.

"Only because you avoid being alone with me. I want you to come and look over the house and decide on colour schemes. You're good at that sort of thing and I'm sure you'd love a home of your own and a husband to share it with. If we were officially engaged you could come to Durban without my aunt. I wish you would, Sandy." It sounded as though he meant it.

"I'll write to you," she said, low-voiced, "when the Major is back."

His farewell was breezy and full of confidence. The incident over his aunt's letter from Major Kennedy might never have happened.

The following Thursday afternoon a note came from the Major. He had arrived back from Cape Town and, if it was quite convenient, he

would like to come to dinner this evening. Perhaps Mrs. Tremayn would be kind enough to send a return message by the boy.

"Bless the old darling," said Sandy. "What a pity that I have to be here. I'll vanish straight after dinner."

"Don't make it too obvious," protested Aunt Catherine. "I expect we shall both be nervous."

"Not the Major! He's won battles before. I should think he was a very fine soldier... maybe a little cautious, but I'm sure he never made mistakes. You're his final victory, Aunt Catherine."

Next day Brin came with the Major to lunch. With some of his old charm he twitted Aunt Catherine.

"I won't believe that you and the major met for the first time at Tegwani," he said. "You must have known very well that you were going to stay on in this house when you pestered me for the timbered ceiling. You're living proof that no woman can be trusted."

"And now we shall be neighbours for ever," she answered equably. "How annoying for you, Brin."

Stoically, Sandy sat through the meal. When Brin and the Major looked at their watches and each other, she joined Aunt Catherine in following the men outside.

At the door of this car Brin turned. "When Katrina gets to know about this she'll be at me to give a party for you. How about coming over to dinner on Saturday and discussing arrangements with her?"

"She mustn't bother," said Aunt Catherine.

Brin laughed. "I always think it more comfortable for all concerned to let Katrina have her head. She adores parties." He slipped a glance at Sandy. "See you on Saturday, with the others?"

She murmured acceptance.

By the Saturday morning mail Aunt Catherine heard from Philip. She read the letter privately, felt overjoyed at its contents, and decided to broach Sandy on the subject at once. When the girl brought elevenses to the front stoep, Mrs. Tremayn told her to call "young missus."

When Sandy came out, Aunt Catherine was shocked at her pallor and listlessness.

"My dear, do you feel ill?"

"A bit of a head. It'll pass."

"You don't eat enough, Sandy. Semi-starvation does cause headaches. Come and sit here. I want to talk to you about something important."

Sandy did not take the other end of the divan, which Aunt Catherine indicated. She sank into a deck chair and crossed her legs, letting her head lean wearily back against the wooden rail.

"You're not happy," Aunt Catherine plunged. "Anyone can see that. Won't you confide in me, darling?"

The endearment, usually reserved for Philip, set tears stabbing at Sandy's eyelids.

She said, "It isn't anything much. I seem to have got out of tune with Tegwani."



"Have you ? I'm so sorry. It was very selfish of me to keep you here, but perhaps now I can make up for it - help you to a fuller, happier life. Did you have a letter from Philip this morning?"

"No. Did you?"

Aunt Catherine laid a hand on an envelope on the table at her side. "This is from him. He wants your engagement to be made official and to have you in Durban for a few weeks, if not permanently. Sandy" - her tones softened with pleading, not unmixed with compassion - "I know that you still feel unready for marriage, and I believe it's indecision that makes you unhappy. Won't you please do as Philip asks?"

"You mean go to Durban... alone ?"

"Why not, my dear? Become engaged to him, see him constantly in the environment that suits him, and I'm sure you'll change your mind about waiting a year or two before you marry."

"Would it please you very much ?"

Aunt Catherine answered simply, without emotion. "It means more to me than my own marriage to the Major."

"In that case," said Sandy with a small strained smile, "you can tell Philip to book a room for me at some small hotel for... well, a month."

"Sandy!" Joy and relief blended in the exclamation. "Oh, Sandy, if you knew what this means to me." She leaned over and kissed the pale young brow. "I'll write to Philip at once and let him know that you will be with him soon. Richard - the Major - will be delighted. He was perturbed at my decision to wait till your marriage was over before considering my own."

So long as everyone else is satisfied, thought Sandy, unable to quell a twinge of bitterness.

"You see," Aunt Catherine added modestly, "the Major had already made up his mind that we should be married not later than the end of next month, so that we'd have time to settle before planting time. My stubbornness over you and Philip disturbed him greatly."

Sandy murmured comprehendingly.

As the day passed she knew that her courage was unequal to an evening at the farmhouse. Katrina would scintillate, Brin would mock, and Aunt Catherine and the Major would *look* proud and secure in one another. They'd discuss the proposed celebration party, and the wedding ... maybe two weddings.

Towards seven o'clock, when Aunt Catherine had dressed, she was astonished to come upon Sandy, still in a cotton dress, lying in an easy chair in the lounge.

"The Major said he'd call at seven. Do hurry, Sandy."

"My head is still thick. D'you mind if I don't go with you?"

Aunt Catherine brought the inevitable cold water and aspirin, but was finally persuaded to leave Sandy at home.

"Go to bed early," she advised. "I'll tell Anisa to stay in the kitchen till we return. Sure there's nothing else you want?"

"Nothing, except that I'd rather you didn't tell Brin that I'm going to Durban."

"Of course I won't. Do try to sleep."

For an hour Sandy remained in the dark room, steeped in the peace of mental exhaustion. Then she made herself a cup of coffee, walked for ten minutes in the garden, and sought her uninviting bed. Now that she was committed, a resigned calm immersed her, a fatal hopelessness that was almost contentment. She would go to Durban as Philip's fiancée and, if she could help it, would never come back to Tegwani. Aunt Catherine's desire for the marriage might be fulfilled, but in return she must give up hope of ever having Philip and Sandy in this house as the guests of herself and the Major.

## CHAPTER NINE

THOUGH Sandy's salary from Aunt Catherine had not been large, she had used so little of it that her bank book showed an accumulation of nearly four hundred pounds. There was no time to add to her wardrobe in Pietsburg, so shopping was postponed till her arrival in Durban where, according to Philip, one could buy loads of stylish clothes and accessories, though little more than a sun suit and a bedroom were necessary.

"You'll find the heat oppressive," the Major warned Sandy, "though it's less so at this time of the year. You must take things gently, and don't sunbathe unless you feel terribly fit, and then only for a few minutes at a time."

"Philip will take every care of Sandy," put in Aunt Catherine fondly.

"Yes, but young men are thoughtless - not only Philip, Catherine, but all young men, and Sandy isn't looking too well. The hot-house atmosphere of Durban is not conducive to good health."

"Philip keeps amazingly well and so, I'm sure, will Sandy." Aunt Catherine smiled knowingly across at the girl. "Love is a wonderful tonic, eh, darling?"

Sandy returned the smile and nodded. Love, as she knew it, was a painful clamouring in the breast, an intolerable, battened yearning ... a disaster. She was longing to put it behind her.

Mystified by her request, the Major had nevertheless promised to say nothing to Brin about her departure on Thursday. He had already arranged for one of his own boys to keep guard at the bungalow at night when Sandy was gone. He was not there when Katrina called in on Wednesday afternoon, to announce that apart from the catering for Saturday's party, which must naturally be left till the last minute,

nothing remained to be done. She was not going to tell them a thing about it. On the party night, surprise must pile on surprise till they became as intoxicated with happiness as she was already. If possible, she glittered more than ever before.

This is how being in love affects her sort of woman, Sandy reflected dispassionately. She's like an endless draught of champagne; no wonder men find her irresistible.

"Just what I've always wanted," Katrina cried. "A big party with *all* our friends. Before, Brin would not let me invite the Afrikanders with you English. Now he gives in." The black eyes flashed with mischief. "The great Brin has acknowledged himself fallible. Isn't that alone sufficient cause for hanging out the bunting!"

Katrina said a lot more and eventually, with a reiteration that they must come in good time, she took herself off in Brin's car.

The Major drove them both into Pietsburg on Thursday, and Sandy left him and Aunt Catherine smiling and waving at her departing train. Then she sank back into her corner and opened one of the magazines which the Major had provided against tedium.

To enter Durban from any other part of the Cape, but particularly from the dry, raw veld, is like coming to another country. Sandy felt it at once, the lushness of sub-tropical growth, the warm, wine-like air, the difference in the trees, so green and abundantly-blossomed. When she had first come from England three years ago, Durban, though strange and exotic, was merely the port for Pietsburg. She had left the town on the day of arrival and had retained a memory only of white futuristic buildings and the rickshaws drawn by huge, feathered, woolly-legged Zulus.

Philip was on the station, holding her hands and laughing and utterly pleased with himself and her. He kissed her and waved a dark-skinned porter to bring her trunk to his car.

"It's well after six. You're an hour and a quarter late," he told her. "Shall we go straight to your hotel, or have dinner first?"

"Whatever you like, once I've had a wash."

"We'll go to the Chaytor, then, and you can check in. I thought we'd dine alone tonight, and afterwards I want you to meet some of the gang." They were purring along a wide, palm-lined road parallel with the sea. The evening sun slanted with curious brilliance across green and red roofs and trees. Towards the east the sky already assumed the mauve blueness of night. Philip was talking fast, of the fun they would have, and how marvellous it was to have her to himself at last.

"Aunt Catherine's a dear, but a little old-fashioned, and she was making you the same way, Sandy. It's no use protesting. She was. At Tegwani I was half afraid to make a move lest it should be a false one. I'm not going to rush you, my sweet, but I do consider it time you woke up and began to enjoy life. You're far too serious."

"You must let me get used to Durban in my own way."

"Oh, no," he said emphatically. "In my way. Luckily, mine is the sort of work that leaves me plenty of free time, so you won't get bored. I'll see to that."

The Chaytor, of course, was not the small hotel he must have known she would prefer, but a huge white building set in tropical grounds and overlooking the sea. Her room was at the front on the first floor, with a balcony wide enough to hold chairs and a studio divan, in case she might wish to sleep in the open air. The modern furnishing of the

room, the private adjoining bathroom and the telephone, set Sandy fidgeting about charges.

She unpacked the smaller case, changed into a rust- coloured dress which turned her hair pale and accentuated the fineness of her features, and went down to join Philip in the lounge. He looked so handsome and happy as he came to meet her that she was filled with a sort of gratitude. If she could keep him like this, his eyes alight, his expression welcoming, they would stand a good chance together.

They dined expensively and well. Philip kept nodding to people he knew, and twice he introduced her to other couples.

"My fiancée, Sandra Cunningham."

"Glad to know you, Sandra."

"You've been holding out on us, Phil! Can't imagine you *married*."

"Oh, so Sandra's the reason you've been on the wagon these last few nights!"

It sounded absurd. Sandra and Phil. But she could see that it titillated Philip to be classed among the nearly- married men, and, setting her little jaw, she determined to fight for their future. She would make herself necessary to him, not as a prop but as a woman, a wife. He would respect her, and she would use his sensitiveness to keep him loyal. A big job but, away from Tegwani, she felt stronger, more capable of handling him. To start with, she might get him to give "the gang" a miss tonight.

When the meal was over he called for the bill. "We'll go along to my hotel now," he said. "Nick Clarkson, my partner, will be there, and lots of others you'll have to meet."

"Need we plunge straight into that?" she begged. "I've only just arrived, Philip."

"Tired?" he asked, rather enjoying himself in the role of considerate male.

"Not particularly, but it would be nice to spend this first evening alone."

"So we shall, my pet. Let's go to the cinema."

That at any rate, was preferable to lounging in an hotel bar, thought Sandy. She stood up for him to drop her coat about her shoulders.

They walked the half-mile to the cinema because parking was difficult, and Sandy could feel that she was in a strange town, among strange people. The queer, purplish night sky sown with myriads of stars was not the sky at all but a sequined canopy drooping oppressively over the city.

The film was poor and Sandy dozed. When they came out Philip teased her about it, and she laughed with him.

"Bad films always do that to me," she confessed, "particularly if I haven't had my full quota of sleep for a night or two."

"Haven't you?"

"What do you think?"

"Thrilled at coming here?"

"Something like that. I couldn't rest."



"I hope you mean what I think you mean." He tucked her arm into his. "I swore not to rush you and I won't, but I'm not going to let you forget-that I'm here, waiting, and wanting you."

A little wall of silence grew between them. They reached her hotel, but did not go in. Instead, he drew her towards the courtyard where his car was parked.

"Sit in with me for a few minutes," he said. "I've something to give you."

Forcing herself to ignore the sudden dread in her bones, she obeyed him. He leaned an arm on the wheel, half-facing her.

"May I tell you that I love you?"

"Philip, you said . . ."

"Yes, I know. But there's this." He slipped a small fat box from his pocket and worked the spring which snapped back the lid. "I can't just jam the thing on your finger and remark on the weather." He picked up her hand, took the large square diamond from its cushion, and pushed it gently on to her finger, saying softly, "Let me do this properly."

His head bent, so that the crisp fair waves brushed her cheek. She felt his lips press the ring into her knuckle, and then his head rose, and he was looking at her with laughing entreaty.

"Don't spoil it, Sandy."

After that, she had to let him take her in his arms. And why shouldn't he? They were engaged now. She must expect lovemaking, and perhaps soon, when the distaste was wholly overcome, she would be able to give back in the heartwhole, unreserved manner he had a right to expect.

His kisses were ardent and expert, but not frightening. In a year Philip had learned quite a bit about Sandy.

"Have you wired to Aunt Catherine?" she asked presently.

"Yes, while you were changing." He looked at her speculatively.

"Did you see her last letter before she posted it ? The one telling me that you were coming to Durban ?"

She shook her head and he went on, "The sweet soul is of the opinion that a month of Durban and me, not to mention the house I've taken, should sweep you entirely off your feet I hope she's right."

"This is my first night," she reminded him in a husky little voice, "and I'm awfully sleepy."

"You must be, and I'm a brute to keep you from your bed. Lie late in the morning and I'll come here for lunch."

Up in her spacious bedroom, Sandy undressed and hung away her clothes. She was twenty years old and grown up - or so she had imagined. But she had not grown up till today, when she had taken the step which cut her off from Tegwani. Nor could she have imagined that growing up was such a painful business. She was alone now, and her responsibilities were heavy - the happiness of Aunt Catherine, the Major and Philip. Her own didn't matter.

It would be foolish to attempt to mould Philip - a man of thirty is already set in many of his ways - but she could influence his leisure hours and encourage his natural instincts. Now, more than ever before, he was her job.

Sandy did not lie late next morning. After the boy had brought early tea, she got up and leaned out of the window. The gardens below were packed with colour, the palms nodded, flamboyants preened,

aloes stood, stiff and stark, spearing a sky of incredible blue. Out there, beyond the garden wall, a sea of deeper blue, white-capped, hurled its rollers over the ivory beach. A few early bathers rode the surf on boards, and Sandy decided to join them as soon as she had bought a new swim suit.

She bathed for an hour, buffeted by the breakers, and left the beach tingling with energy and heat. She stood under the shower in her bathroom, before towelling herself, not too vigorously and getting into a fresh green dress that made her look young and vital.

When Philip arrived for lunch he had a similar appearance of clean-cut youth. His tropical suit showed him lean and fit, and when, with an apology, he sloughed off his jacket, the soft cream linen shirt, open at the throat and short-sleeved, revealed forearms that were brown and glinting with golden hairs.

Women - even oldish women - looked at him and smiled with an inward pleasure at what they saw. Some of them included Sandy in the glance, but mostly the attention was for him. Many of the women were good-looking and all were expensively clothed. Momentarily, Sandy wondered why he had not become involved with one of them; they were so much more his type than she was.

"I'm yours for the rest of the day," he said. "What shall we do this afternoon?"

"What do you suggest?"

"A drive round the city and up to Berea, then back to Jameson Park. After tea we'll take a look at the house. Game?"

"Whatever you say. This is your city."

"My city and my girl. Am I the lucky one!"

They drove through the lovely town and up to the heights. The city spread below, a jewel with a thousand facets, lying on the rim of the beckoning Indian Ocean, the beautiful natural harbour sheltering ships from the seven seas. It was a panorama to quicken the heart and set pulses humming. Sandy, who had suffered no more from the wanderlust than any other normal English girl, found herself thanking Providence with all her being for bringing her to this country.

They had tea in a tea garden at a table under a mangrove. A monkey swung down and took the vacant chair, and when Sandy fed him a cake others appeared.

Sandy enjoyed being surrounded by the gossiping little things. Though she had often come across a monkey at Tegwani, she had never seen them in such numbers nor so tame as those which abounded in Durban.

"Quite charming in a tea garden, but they can be a nuisance," Philip commented. "Nick Clarkson left his car on his sister's drive one Sunday and came out to find the upholstery ripped to shreds. It's not uncommon for a room to be ransacked if the windows are left open."

"Aren't monkeys afraid of anything?"

"Of big dogs. The monkey menace isn't so acute where our house is, but I'll get a couple of hounds for safety. If you're ready, we'll go down there now."

Briskly, stifling a throttling reluctance, Sandy got back into the car.

It was a modern house, white, with green roof and shutters, set in a sub-tropical garden that seethed with bird life and colour. The five main rooms were large and lofty, opening from a wide corridor, which took a right-angle turn to the kitchen and pantry and a back stoep. There was a garage and servants' quarters in one long separate

building, almost the whole of which was enveloped in cascades of rich, purple bougainvillea. "Nick thinks we ought to get curtains up and keep the garden trim," said Philip. "You see, our board was up here and as the place has remained empty we're still getting enquiries."

"You can't choose curtains till you furnish."

"Any colour will do to start with. We can replace them when we're ready."

"That's wasteful. The windows are huge."

He gave her arm a little shake. "No parsimony. I told you there's plenty of money coming in. Nick said net curtaining will do. By the way, he knows you're here. We're invited to dine with him tonight."

"Is he married ?"

"Not at the moment," with a grin. "He's just parted from his second wife."

"Oh, dear."

"Now, Sandy. He's just a misunderstood husband. I've met heaps of them. They made the mistake of marrying girls who knew too much."

"I suppose they live in hotels ?"

"Yes, mostly. You mustn't be stuffy with them, darling. Some are great chaps." He gazed back at the house from the gate. "You like it, then ?"

"It's splendid, and the view over the sea is dazzling. You must have paid a great deal."

He laughed, but avoided her eyes. "I paid nothing. The house was a sort of bonus, from Nick. One of these days I may tell you about it."

I ought to force him to tell me now, thought Sandy, But her blood panicked. If there were subterfuge to discover let it come later, when she might be more competent to deal with it.

That evening she dressed carefully in a new white dress bought only this morning in one of the many gown shops in the town. Dining out constantly with Philip and his friends, she would need plenty of changes of evening dress, and this one brought her modest total up to four.

She was anxious to appear at her best to meet Nick Clarkson. His, Philip had explained, was the brain that brought in the big money. Philip mostly handled the uncomplicated business, but even so, Nick was prepared to take him on a fifty-fifty basis as soon as he could put sufficient capital into the firm.

"But you have plenty of cash," she had reminded him, puzzled.

"Plenty of pocket-money," he had answered glibly. "In my position you need a heap to spend - the expenses are heavy. But Nick is concentrating on a big land deal. I mentioned it to you at Tegwani. He needs ten thousand at least."

Sandy had gasped. "Is he expecting it from.. *you* ?"

"Don't worry, my sweet. I haven't got it to give him ... yet."

It was all a long way beyond Sandy. She was beginning to feel that the most she could do for him was to smile prettily at his associates and keep her fingers crossed.

Nick Clarkson lived at a club on the Esplanade. Sandy had expected to meet someone florid who smoked cigars, talked loudly and

guffawed at his own jokes. The ascetic- looking man in his middle forties with a wing of white hair at each temple and finely-modulated voice came as an agreeable surprise. Philip's safe enough with him, she judged instantly, innocently certain that any man of dubious character must show it in his face.

"Philip, how lovely she is," he exclaimed quietly. "You're a fortunate man."

"I know it. Sandy, this is Nick."

Nick took her hand, bowed over it slightly, and drew it into the crook of his arm.

"We're dining alone - just the three of us, but I have some friends coming along later - they're friends of Philip's, too."

He had a way with him that carried others along. Over dinner he refused to discuss business. He toasted Sandy, allowed his eyes to linger a moment on her ring and to travel over the sweet picture of her in this crowded, noisy room.

"Philip doesn't deserve you," he said, only half in jest. To Philip he added, "The sooner you're married and take Sandy out of this atmosphere the better."

"It rests with Sandy."

"Does it?" His inflection was suave and charming. "Then I don't think you will have to wait long. I'm sure she's already crazy to make a start on the house. Shall we adjourn to my rooms?"

Nick rented a suite just over the club lounge. His Malay manservant showed Sandy into a bedroom where she combed her hair and powdered her nose. She heard other people arriving and the chink of glasses. The radio blared out and snapped off; voices were raised to

compete with the music, lowered again. Sandy picked up her purse, automatically set straight a mat on the dressing-table and walked out to the small square lobby which served as a hall. The sitting-room door stood open a foot. She could see smoke wreathing and smell drink.

"For heaven's sake," cried Philip's voice from within the room. "Not so much whisky!"

"What's the matter, old boy... tight already?"

"Didn't you know?" in high-pitched feminine tones. "Poor old Phil has to lay off. His fiancée drinks squash."

"No! Really, old boy?" Again the fatuous male. "That's awful."

"Not *so* awful. Phil's going to marry a little Easter hen all set to produce a big golden egg. Nick says she's pretty, too, which is just Phil's luck."

Tensely, Sandy waited for a rebuke of some sort from Philip, something to prove that the chatter was not to his taste. Nothing came but a shout of laughter over a smashed glass. She felt trapped.

"Hello." Nick Clarkson came from another room and clipped the ready hand round her elbow. "Come in and meet the crowd. Phil's engagement has caused quite a stir."



## CHAPTER TEN

SATURDAY morning. The telephone rang and Sandy reached an arm out of bed to bring the receiver close to her ear.

"Sandy? Good morning, darling. How do you feel after last night's binge?"

"So-so. Are you up already, Philip?"

"I have to make a call I neglected for your sake yesterday. I rang to tell you that Nick is expecting us to spend the day with him at Port Crale. He has people living there who are giving a dinner-party this evening, which means that we shan't be back in Durban till the small hours. You might let your hotel know. And I'm afraid we shall have to take a couple of passengers in the car. You won't mind, will you?"

"Do we have to go, Philip?"

"Nick will be hurt if we don't. Besides, how else can we spend the day?"

"Durban is new to me. I thought we might bathe and drive."

"We can do that any day. Be ready about ten-thirty, there's a pet."

"What do I have to wear?"

"Just an ordinary dress. You look a knockout in anything. And, Sandy..."

"Yes?"

"I have a note from a client asking me to bring you out to dinner tomorrow. He lives at Berea."

"Not Sunday, Philip!"

"He's a client, my sweet."

"Oh, well... if it's unavoidable."

"So long, then. Don't go to bye-byes again."

Sandy dropped the telephone back into place. Philip must have broadcast her arrival very thoroughly if even his clients were aware of it. His behaviour with her before his friends had been a little defiant, and there was a quality in it that she could not quite understand, though it might be explained as a desire to show the sophisticated circle in which he moved that there would be more to his marriage than the acquisition of a nest egg. In his own fashion he did love her, Sandy assured herself. His weakness and lack of discretion had thrust her into a humiliating position, but he did not see it that way. Aunt Catherine's money was just a lucky incidental to the marriage.

In justice to Philip that, more or less, was an accurate gauge of his reactions. Last night, during the party in Nick's room, his partner had taken him aside.

"If we don't snaffle that land soon, someone else will. Our option closes this week."

"I know, Nick. I thought of writing to my aunt about it, but I'm sure she won't part up till Sandy's my wife."

"Then why the hell don't you marry the girl!"

"It sounds easy, doesn't it?" Philip had flushed. "You try to marry a girl who's in love with someone else and see how you get on."

"Holy smoke." Nick Clarkson had turned a narrowed gaze towards the corner where Sandy sat conversing unhappily with that drunken fool, Martin. "Who's the other man?"

"A citrus planter - the owner of Tegwani Estate. He's fond of her in a patronizing way, but she's in up to her neck. I guessed it last time I was there."

"You should have done something about it - compromised her thoroughly."

"With my aunt never more than ten yards away ? I haven't stood a chance of getting anywhere near Sandy till now, and honestly, Nick, I don't see how I'm going to hurry her into a marriage she's heart and mind against. She isn't like the women we're used to."

"Women are all alike under the face powder. Flatter them, make love to them, and you have them purring like dainty Cheshire cats." His tone changed. "D'you think your aunt will be good for a second ten thousand in about three months ?"

"I think so," Philip had answered confidently. "She owns about eighty thousand and half of it will be mine during her lifetime. Everything hinges on my marrying Sandy."

"I've given you the house as bait and marry her you shall," the other had returned forcibly, "if I have to hold the shotgun myself."

Characteristically, Philip had shrugged off the conversation. No one here had an inkling of what he was up against, the reticence and shrinking. Oh, he wasn't a fool. He knew Sandy, they didn't. He would consider it excellent going if he got her to name the day before her month's holiday was up. Nick would have to renew his option or find a couple of thousand himself as a deposit on the land purchase. Certainly the firm's accounts couldn't stand it just now.

Occasionally, Philip became tired of big business deals that seldom came off. Once, he had even had the wild notion of deserting once he and Sandy were married, and taking her back to England - with the money, of course - and starting up there on his own. That way, he would at least ensure that Nick couldn't swallow most of it. Ah well, worry never paid dividends. It would all work out in time.

Sandy had had her bathe and was waiting on the terrace for him when he drove up to the Chaytor about ten minutes late. They had milk shakes and biscuits.

She said, "I've been thinking, Philip ..."

"Have you, darling? That's clever of you."

Sandy was not put off. "About us," she went on. "An engagement is no less a matter of give and take than marriage. Mr. Clarkson seems all right, but I didn't take to the rest of your friends, and I certainly shan't care to meet them every day. Besides, I'd like to see some of the surrounding country - without that screaming herd. What I mean is" - Sandy was astonished at her own firmness - "that I prefer you should ask me before arranging dinner-parties and so on."

"Just as you say," he acquiesced readily. "Estate agents have to hug the limelight. I get tired of it myself sometimes." He drained his glass and sighed. "Milk tastes much better with brandy in it."

Sandy was watching a small blonde girl with a perfect figure swing along the terrace to a table in the shade. The girl wore a scanty two-piece sun-suit and nothing else. A coloured waiter brought her a drink and she swallowed it quickly and ordered another.

Philip's stare followed Sandy's. "Oh, lord," he said under his breath.

"Who is she ?" asked Sandy.

"Deirdre Clarkson, Nick's second wife. A divorce is pending." He stood up. "Let's go."

The girl at the other table had seen him. She came straight over and smiled at him, and then at Sandy.

"Well, Phil. Haven't seen you for a Couple of months. How about a drink, for old time's sake ?"

The waiter brought a chair, and Philip had to seat her and sit down again himself.

"Sandy, this is Deirdre."

The girl drank, then propped the glass between her thumbs, regarding them with a weary, quizzical expression.

"So you've got a fiancée, Phil. How nice."

"I thought you were, in Cape Town," he said, unsmiling.

"I was, but I got lonesome." She leaned back and surveyed Sandy. "I hope you've known him a long time. Phil's going to grow like Nick." She gave a silly laugh. "The first Mrs. Clarkson is no more. The second is on the downgrade. Other wives will follow in quick succession."

"Deirdre!" said Philip angrily.

"Sorry. You must have been a sweet boy, Phil, before you fell in with Nick. What did he pay for your soul ?"

Philip was pale about the mouth. "Perhaps you'd better go, Deirdre."

She flipped her fingers and used them to push herself up from the table. The carmined mouth was crooked, the mascaraed lashes flickered. She turned and walked away.

There was a short, prickling silence.

Sandy looked after the girl, saw her pay a bill and collect a beach-wrap that hung over the terrace wall, and make her way out to the Esplanade. Deirdre Clarkson was not staying here, thank heaven, but Sandy would be haunted by the hard little mouth, the thin plucked eyebrows and the dead blue of her eyes for a long time. Gravely, she turned back to Philip. "She's only a girl - no older than I am."

"Forget it," he muttered. "She's Nick's concern - not ours."

True enough, yet Sandy was vaguely troubled.

"Tell me what happened between her and Nick."

"How should I know?"

"You were here, acquainted with them both."

"I heard the gossip, that's all. Nick and Deirdre hadn't been getting on. He went home one evening - they lived in a flat - and found another fellow there. He turned her out."

"But what has she against you ?"

"Me ?" Colour came up under his eyes. He laughed carelessly. "You're imagining things. What could she have against me but my partnership with Nick? Give it up, Sandy. You'll never understand a girl of Deirdre's type if you ponder it for ever." He showed her his watch. "Gone eleven! And I was to pick up our passengers at ten-forty-five. Come along."

On the way to Port Crale Sandy felt deflated, the heart pressed out of her. She had tried very hard this morning not to remember that this was Saturday, the day of the party at Tegwani House, and that if Brin had not already learned that she had left the bungalow he would do so tonight. He'd lift his shoulders and say, "If ever a girl chased trouble ..." Determinedly, he refused to allow that she owed anything to Aunt Catherine. Nor would he admit that Philip was worth saving.

And Sandy loved him for his pigheadedness; yes, and even for his cruelty. Incredible that Brin knew nothing of the terror and agony of her love for him, the fear and yearning. Was Katrina's love like that - so that her heart shook at the sound of a firm tread, so that she was excited and miserable, wildly happy in a single smile, and aching with an almost physical pain at the emptiness of a day without Brin?

It was different for Katrina. She need never starve for the sight of him, nor dwell with anguish upon the projection of Brin in another woman's arms.

The day passed in a blur of noise and festivity. Nick Clarkson's parents, apparently, were celebrating their golden wedding, though just why Nick should haul over a crowd of young folk who had never previously met the old couple was obscure.

It was about midnight, when Sandy drooped in the front seat of Philip's car and shivered at the prospect of the long dark journey to Durban, that Nick Clarkson peered in and grinned at them.

"You get away first, Phil. Your little girl looks whacked. How about coming out in the yacht tomorrow afternoon ? I thought we might dine at sea."

"Old Hensman has asked us up to dinner."

"The deuce he has! Well, you d better go. What are your plans for Monday?"

"I don't know. If we're not too busy at the office I'd like to take Sandy for a long drive through the sugar and tea plantations... perhaps to Stanger."

"Oh." A pause. "Be seeing you before then. Good night, Sandra. 'Night, Phil."

Sandy dozed.

The whole of the next day they stayed in Durban, enjoying the tended lawns, the charming gardens and the ocean beating in on the sand and covering their bodies.

"We should hear from Aunt Catherine tomorrow," Philip said, as they sunbathed. "Wonder how she's making out with the Major ?"

"They're entirely happy together."

He nodded up at the sky. "Can't be much dizzy rapture about it, though, at their age. You'd think Kennedy would prefer someone younger."

"Aunt Catherine is younger than he."

"I meant about thirty. He's not senile."

"Neither is he a Nick Clarkson."

Casually, Philip replied, "Nick's the sort who should never marry at all. He tires too easily. The Major's an old faithful."

"And not to be sneered at," Sandy reminded him a little sharply.



"I believe you're fond of the old chap yourself," he teased.

"I am, and unashamed of it. As a type the Major is almost extinct, and for that reason alone he's to be treasured. Even your worldly women friends, deep inside them, value chivalry and nobility. They're shoddy because the modern man expects it of them."

He got up on an elbow, amazed and laughing. "I say. That's strong meat, from you. Are you trying to reclaim me?"

"No charge for trying!" For a minute she watched a buxom black nanny paddling with two delicately-featured white children. "You're quite sure you gave Aunt Catherine the name of my hotel in the wire?"

"Certain."

But there was no letter for Sandy on Monday morning. She worked it out. A telegram sent on Thursday night would reach Pietsburg or Fort Cradock early next morning. A boy would ride out with it, reaching the bungalow by lunch-time or soon after. If Aunt Catherine had replied by Saturday's post the letter would be here by now. Maybe she had waited till after the party; maybe something had prevented her getting the letter to Pietsburg in time for the post. Sandy's anxiety would have been less had Aunt Catherine not promised to write by return - which meant Friday.

She had counted so much on the letter, and mention of Brin, that the lack of it distorted her common sense. She made enquiries at the hotel desk and at the post office. Brows rose. All letters went through normal channels, of course.

At lunch the dining-room was crowded. Sandy came out and on the terrace, willing that Philip should bring a letter with him. She felt so

cut off and estranged from Tegwani, like a hermit bird dropped into a cage of parrots.

"Do you mind if I sit here ?"

Sandy looked up, murmured an automatic "Not a bit," before recognizing Deirdre Clarkson.

The girl wore a dress today, a charming thing in light gold. As she slid into the canvas chair Sandy noticed scarlet sandals and emerald toe-nails.

"Since Saturday I've been watching out for you," said Deirdre. "I saw you yesterday but Phil was with you. Is he coming here this afternoon ?"

"He's due at any minute."

A quick drawn breath. "Then I'd better hurry with what I have to say. Has he told you about Nick and me ?"

"A little."

"A very little, I dare say." She spoke wryly, without resentment. "Nick and I were married two years. After the first year our relationship began to disintegrate, but I was still enough in love with him to keep on trying. Then Phil came to Durban, on holiday. From the first he and I got on together and the fact that Nick liked him put ideas into my head. When he came to live here permanently, I made Phil welcome at the flat, hoping his liking for me would weigh with Nick. He betrayed me."

"Philip ... betrayed you ?"

The shallow blue eyes stared curiously. "I was afraid that would shake you, but you don't look astonished - only sick."

"How did he let you down ?"

"Quite gently. He came to the flat straight from the office one day - got there before Nick. When Nick came in through the balcony Phil was kissing me. He'd never done it before." A small, restrained gesture. "They'd arranged it."

"Are you sure ?"

"Phil had never shown the slightest desire even to touch me before he heard Nick's feet on the balcony steps that evening. Nick told me to go and magnanimously offered to supply the evidence for divorce himself."

For a minute or two Sandy was speechless. Then: "If what you're saying is true, you've been abominably used."

"What have I to gain by lying to you? If you're as much in love with Phil as I was with Nick, the fact of his being a cheat won't stop you from marrying him, but you'll go into it with your eyes wide open. You may even change him." With a hasty movement she was on her feet. "There's Phil, just leaving his car. I shan't see you again. Good luck."

Without emotion, Sandy watched Philip's approach. He dropped a kiss on the top of her head and slipped down into the chair Deirdre had left.

"Did you have a letter from Aunt Catherine?" she asked.

"No. Did yours come?"

She shook her head. "It's unlike her not to keep a promise."

"She's in love," he rallied her, smilingly. "People in love are not responsible."

"What do you know about it ?" she quietly enquired.

Philip's eyes swerved seawards, but he retained the smile. "Plenty. I'm in love, too," He gave her no time to challenge him. "This afternoon, we're going to the river. Nick has to take a fellow out to Carstown to look over a pineapple farm we have for sale. He's going to leave us on the way at a shack he owns, and pick us up this evening on his return. We'll picnic, like we used to at the Drift, near Tegwani."

"I'll go indoors for my hat," she said.

The face that looked back from her bedroom mirror was haggard and blue-shadowed under the eyes. She couldn't go on with it, she told herself. You can marry without love, but something has to stand in the place of love. Respect, affection, shared interests. She would write to Aunt Catherine...

A whistle came from below her window and she looked out.

"Nick's here already," Philip called. "Can you come at once?"

She sat with him in the back of Nick Clarkson's car. The other man in front exchanged a few comments with them and settled down to an interest in the passing plantations.

Just after four Nick drew up at a stone bridge over a slow-moving river.

"You remember the way up to the cabin, Phil ?"

"Can't very well miss it if we follow the track," Philip answered. "What time shall we expect you?"

"Eightish, I should think. There's an hour's driving each way to the farm ... yes, about eight. I'll stop just here and give the war-cry. Don't

forget to take the box of food. You have matches for the paraffin stove? Good. Use anything you find up there."

The path, narrow and grassy, bristled with tree stubs hacked by natives. To the left, through a belt of tall thin trees, they could see the river, dark and sinuous, thickly- banked on the other side with wattle and mangrove. The track twisted and presently they emerged into a clearing where Nick's shack stood, about a dozen yards from the edge of the river.

The one-room log cabin, thatched with banana leaves and set up on greenheart wood piles, had been built by Nick as a retreat where he could beguile prospective clients with good food, drink and a weekend's fishing. Inside, it was furnished in solid teak and hide, the floor scrubbed yellow and spattered with kaross skins. One end was obviously the kitchen, for an enamel wash-bowl stood on a pedestal just under the window, and a paraffin cooking-stove and an array of pans were squashed between this substitute for a sink and the food cupboard. A folded pile of blankets rested on a camp-bed against the wall, but the remainder of the room was a comfortable dining-lounge.

Philip dumped the food on the table, slipped the padlock into his pocket and dusted his hands together.

"Grand little place, isn't it ? You and I will have one like this for our honeymoon... for part of it, anyway."

"Let's make a cup of tea," said Sandy coolly. "Do we use river water?"

"I think there's enough in the filter. Nick was up last weekend. He always leaves a boy to clean up and fill the stove with paraffin and attend to the filter."

Sandy was not in picnic mood. She emptied cakes and sandwiches on to plates, made some tea and took her own cup to the chair nearest the open door. If Philip noticed a chill in the atmosphere it had no effect upon his humour. He messed with fishing-rods and sinkers, went out to cast a line, and called back to her to come and look at the grotesque growths under the water. He was like an engaging, weak-willed boy, anxious to please and placate now that there was no one demanding sophistication.

At about six, night came down, suddenly, like the ruthless unfolding of a shutter. Philip lit an oil-lamp and closed the door.

He said, "Aunt Catherine wouldn't approve of this - our being in the wilds, alone."

"It's early," she remarked.

"And we're engaged. That covers a multitude of indiscretions."

"It might, if we'd committed any," she agreed briefly.

Unexpectedly, he dropped to his knees on the rug at her feet. "What's on your mind?" he begged. "You know I'd do anything in the world for you, Sandy."

It was difficult to avoid the hurt eagerness in his eyes. But there was Deirdre.

"Such as... what?"

"I've cut down considerably on drink. I'll try to do without it altogether, if you say so."

"Why should you?"

"Because I want to make you happy, and have you looking forward to our marriage as much as I am. There's the house. You'll love furnishing, Sandy."

"You told me the house cost you nothing, Philip. I believe I know why."

Fear quickened his voice. "Nick gave it to me as a sort of advance wedding-gift. We weren't even engaged then, but he insisted." He grasped her fingers. "You don't trust Nick, do you?"

Her expression was distressed as she countered, "I wish it was only that. Don't let's talk about it, Philip. Can't you find us some books to read ?"

His mouth set obstinately. He tried to tighten his grip of her fingers but, somehow, they slipped away.

"It's no good, Philip," she said. "I won't discuss anything here. Please get up and behave normally."

He did get up, but remained standing over her, his mouth pulled ugly. He laughed. "That's rather cute, coming from you. When have you ever allowed me to behave normally?" Twisting, he crossed the room to a sideboard, opened the cupboard and got out a bottle, a siphon and glasses. "Sorry there's no milk left" - with the suggestion of a sneer. "What will you have... plain water?"

Retort was unnecessary. He poured half a tumbler of whisky, added a splash of soda and emptied the glass. Sandy reached for a cigarette from the box on the table. With an anger that was half petulance, he struck a match for her, and placed several paper-backed novels on the arm of her chair, after which he helped himself to another drink and flung himself full length along the couch. There he lay wondering

what was going on at the back of that wide, smooth forehead and the veiled eyes.

Sandy opened a book and at intervals turned a page, though she read not a word. They should not have come here, to be alone together like this. When they got back to the hotel she would go straight to bed and tomorrow they would talk. They would face Aunt Catherine. The few days away from Tegwani had released her natural courage and shown her that independence, though it could be lonely and at times forlorn, was nothing to be afraid of, compared with marriage to Philip.

After his fourth whisky she asked him the time.

"Ten minutes to eight," he told her companionably. "Early yet."

At once she rose and caught up her hat from the table. "We have to find our way back to the bridge in the dark."

"Do we?" He was leaning against the wall, contemplating her with a sharp grin. "Nick won't be surprised if we're not there."

"Of course we must be there," she exclaimed. "How else can we get back to Durban tonight? Please hurry, Philip."

"Oceans of time. You heard Nick say he'd give the war-cry. Sit down again, Sandy. Relax. You're not going till we've discussed a few things. Time was, darling," the endearment slurred horribly, "when your gratitude to me for presenting you with a ready-made aunt and a home under her roof was inexpressible and profound. That was in the days before you lost your foolish head over Brin Master-son."

Sandy whitened, even to the lips. Her hand sought the heavy panelling of the door for support.



"How... dare you say that!" she breathed.

His reply was almost a snarl. "It took four stiff whiskies and the knowledge that you're penned in with me till daybreak! You've never believed that I love you..."

"Would you do this to me if you did?" she whispered through the tight coil in her throat.

He sagged into the couch, his arms lying along his thighs, and plunged his face into his palms. Sandy felt no pity, no softening of the hard wall that encased her lungs.

"I'm going to the bridge," she said.

"It's no use," he answered, muffled. "Nick's gone."

She stayed by the door, very still and pale. "So this ... was arranged ? Rather childish of you, wasn't it, Philip ?"

"It was Nick's idea, not mine. He suggested it this morning and I told him it wouldn't work. He was sure it would ... said you were the type who'd beg for marriage once you'd been compromised."

"Is Mr. Clarkson so short of money ?"

The tired scorn in her tones made him wince and raise his head. Genuine wretchedness lined the corners of his eyes, a shaking hand pressed back the fair hair.

"I was against this, Sandy, believe me. I told him you were too proud to be caught that way, and that I wouldn't touch you without your consent. You're safe with me, Sandy ..."

"As safe as Deirdre Clarkson was," she said without heat. "Oh yes, I know all about that. She told me herself, today. That was the final

bump, Philip. For Aunt Catherine's sake I'd have married a weakling, but not for anyone will I tie myself to a cheat and a traitor."

"That's unfair." His mouth was trembling. "You've only heard Deirdre's side."

She said coldly, "You do admit, then, that there was something in her statement about you and Nick co-operating to make her look like a wanton ?"

Sullenly, he answered, "Nick had the whip hand. I made over the purchase money for the junior partnership to him and had to rely on his generosity for my salary. We've been doing well, but Nick spends fast."

"So he was anxious to have you married and get his hands on *my* purchase money."

"I've already told you that we're in the market for some valuable land..."

"To be paid for by Aunt Catherine but registered in the joint names of Mr. Clarkson and yourself. If you had any pluck you'd break with that scoundrel."

"Nick's all right, I tell you."

"You honestly think that, knowing what he did to his wife - and coerced you into trying on with me ?"

"Deirdre's out of it," he said, "and that leaves only you. If you'd married me when I first asked you, none of this would have happened. But because of your stubbornness and restraint, and the losing of your girlish heart to Brin Masterson, I had to wait." He had risen and taken a pace or two towards her. In the dusky light his cheeks were hollowed, his lips mobile. Anger and frustration had

stripped him of charm and good looks. "Nick swore that if you marry me within the next ten days no one will ever hear from him about this night in the shack."

"There'll be nothing to hear," she said wearily. "I'm going."

He lunged across and pulled her into his arms, reached her mouth with his own.

"You think so, do you?" he panted. "Perhaps I'll teach you differently. I'm sick of waiting and pleading and giving in to everyone. I'll have my way, for a change."

"Let me go," she cried. "Please. You'll hate yourself for this tomorrow."

He raised his head and she saw in his eyes a desperate need, which was not wholly physical. Swiftly, she whirled away, wrenched open the door and ran.

"Sandy," he yelled. "Come back!"

He clung to the door-frame, shaking his head clear of madness and whisky. The little idiot, to dash off like that through the trees. This was Africa, where jackals and even leopard were known to prowl, apart from other dangers.

"Sandy!"

Now, he couldn't even hear the snapping of twigs. But she would not get far before he caught her up. There was the rifle to load, the lamp to douse, the padlock to be snapped on the door. Gosh, he'd forgotten the flashlight. No time to go back for it, though.

He was running and leaping, staggering from side to side of the path. A sudden night wind screamed savagely through the branches, and

Philip thought, "She'll be terrified. Poor Sandy." More frightened himself than he'd care to admit, he dashed on in the noisy, weaving darkness.

At a twist in the path he hurtled full-tilt into a tree. He gave a stifled gasp, felt warm blood coursing down the bridge of his nose from his forehead and fell flat, unconscious.

There is a point at which terror evaporates before a forced courage. Sandy reached it at the same moment that she arrived at the bridge where, earlier, they had parted from Nick Clarkson. Her legs were welted, her dress ripped, and a bleeding trail stretched from above one elbow down to the wrist. The raging dryness of her throat spread downwards in a widening sweep to her diaphragm. For the time being necessity and bodily discomfort ousted other troubles.

Unhesitating, she turned right to climb out of the valley towards the last township they had passed which, as far as she *could* remember, *must be between eight and ten* miles away. The road was rough, unsurfaced, and plentifully spattered with the large rock chips which help cars to grip when rains transform by-ways into racing rivers. Not the sort of thoroughfare the knowledgeable driver would tackle in the dark. Sandy paused long enough to wish she were more countrified in the choice of shoes, and then started off in the middle of the road. Nothing, except a hooting vehicle, would have persuaded her to trudge through the grass; she trusted that snakes would think twice before slithering out on the rough, dusty track.

Oddly, her mind scarcely dwelled at all on Philip; he had been dealt with and she never wanted to see him again. She was more concerned with fighting the sudden headwind which swept down *the channel* between *the trees with* maniac fury, tearing off limbs in passing and scattering twigs like rose petals.

When at last the lights of a far-away house glimmered above the thorn trees, Sandy was almost too spent to turn along the narrow lane that must lead to it. Here the hedges were close and moths dashed about her face. Nightjars whirred and bullfrogs croaked in a nearby *sluit*. The road was alive with small animals - dassie, perhaps - which Sandy noticed and sidestepped as a sleepwalker avoids door jams.

The path ended at a gate which opened on to a beaten earth drive. Sandy stopped. For a wild moment she thought of creeping into the stoep and stealing away again at daybreak. Then a dog bounded out and set up a racket. The door was pulled wide, flooding the porch with mellow lamplight.

"I ... I'm terribly sorry," she said from the foot of the steps.

The boy stared - at her white face with the ghastly smile, her torn dress and the long streak of congealed blood on her arm.

"Mother!" he called, half in fright. "Come quickly."

She appeared at once; comely, plump and about thirty- five, wearing a homely print dress. "What is it, Koos? Oh!" She pushed him aside. "Give the girl room to enter, won't you? You're a fine, hospitable lad for fourteen. Go and see if the kettle's warming."

Stiffly, Sandy walked into the little house.

"*Hemel!*" the woman ejaculated. "What a blessing my brother-in-law, Jakobus, called this evening and made us late to bed. You would not otherwise have seen our light. Sit down, *liefste*, and let me tend that arm."

Sandy said, "You're ... awfully kind," and fell into a tub chair.

Shadowily, she was conscious that a man stood over her, whispering urgently in Afrikaans while his wife bandaged. Arms slid under her

and soon she lay in a clean iron bed in a tiny bare room, and ate a few spoonfuls of thin mealie porridge.

"You don't even know my name," she said weakly.

"No need," replied the woman soothingly. "At first I thought of a car accident. But no. Your feet are sore, your hair is tangled with the wind. You must rest, not talk."

"I'm staying in Durban."

"No matter. Tonight you sleep here. Tomorrow, we shall see. You are warm now, *ja* ?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"Good. I will take the lamp but leave candle and matches. Sleep well and do not worry."

Advice which fatigue compelled Sandy to follow. For a few minutes she gazed at the square window shut tight against the gale. Then, without a warning blink of the lids, she slept.

She was awakened by a rod of sunlight which had moved down over the pillow, picking up glints in her hair and endowing her blue-veined lids and the thick dark lashes lying so softly closed with an air of pathos. The wind had died.

Gingerly, because her joints felt hinged and rusty, Sandy sat up. Her dress was disgracefully grubby and torn and the shoes down there beside the bed were crumpled and red with dust. She would present a lively spectacle for the other guests at the Chaytor Hotel.

Outside, two or three children played and chattered in Afrikaans. Kitchen noises came loud and often; the clank of a pan, the clatter of china, firm footsteps.

A tap at the door announced her hostess, pink and fresh, her brown hair well brushed into a series of little waves on top and a roll that reached round the back of her head from temple to temple.

"*Goeiemore*. Had you a good sleep? Now you want a bath. *ja*? We do not have a bathroom, but we manage. You will see." She called through the doorway, "Nadomo! Koos! Bring the bath."

Nadomo, a Zulu house-boy, backed into the room followed at the other end of a long tin bath, by the son, Koos.

"Not to upset it!" The woman swung round again to Sandy. "Perhaps we can learn names now. I am Mrs. Pienaar. Koos is my eldest son. The others you will meet at breakfast."

Sandy explained whom she was, adding, "You must be curious about the way I came here - on such a night and looking like a scarecrow." She hesitated. "I ... was supposed to meet someone down at the bridge near the river. Somehow we missed, so I decided to walk - to the next township, if necessary."

"The bridge!" - with an expressive gesture. "Five steep miles in such a wind. Well, now we know each other let us get on. I will bring you one of my house-frocks. You are small, but they are belted and will pull in. When you are ready, come to the kitchen." She laughed gutturally. "Your nose will lead you to the kitchen and the good breakfast you are needing."

When she was alone, Sandy carefully got out of bed. She felt feeble and empty, and for a minute or two was swayed by waves of heat and cold, as though she were about to be sick. She took hold of herself and the room righted. Presently she was able to step into the bath.

In the borrowed house-frock and flat felt slippers she was a little girl "dressing up". She used the clean white comb which lay on the

home-carved chest, but her face remained clear of make-up, for she had no handbag. It hurt to think that she had no money to offer these good people, who were obviously badly in need of it. She hoped they'd believe her expressions of gratitude; she would send them money or a gift from Durban.

She joined the Pienaars for scrambled eggs and bacon and a bitter coffee substitute which they grew themselves. Mr. Pienaar, whose English was negligible, left his wife to inform Sandy that he would drive her into Durban himself. No, it was no trouble at all. He always went up once a week and today would do as well as any other. He would be ready at ten o'clock.

When she went back to the bedroom the bath had disappeared, and if her shoes had not been restored to their erstwhile beige daintiness, at least someone had shorn them of dust and wrinkles.

"You will come' to see us again ?" cried Mrs. Pienaar, shrewdly regarding Sandy's pale face as she sat in the old sedan car.

"I'll try. I'm so very grateful for your kindness, Mrs. Pienaar."

"It was nothing. *Tot siens*, Miss Cunningham." Her tone was pleasant but final, as if she knew their worlds, having collided for an instant, would never touch again.

Mr. Pienaar's lack of English enforced silence. Detachedly, Sandy surveyed the plantations. First, she must change hotels, leave the Chaytor for one of the more obscure type at the back of the town. Then she would write to Aunt Catherine and beg her to understand that she and Philip cared too little for each other to marry. As soon as the rest of her possessions arrived from Tegwani she would get out of Durban. Where she went wasn't important, after all. It was the escape that mattered, the breaking away from the heartache of the past months.



Mrs. Tremayn thought on a different plane. Perhaps her own new delight had sharpened her senses for, throughout the Thursday of Sandy's departure, she constantly recalled the scene she had surprised on the front stoep in the opalescent haze of early morning, and probed its implications. Brin's anger. Sandy's resignation.

That Sandy's feeling for Philip had never reached ecstatic heights Aunt Catherine had always known, but she had hoped, rather foolishly maybe, that propinquity would cure her shyness and increase the warmth of her affection. Marriages based on friendship often lasted longer than sudden, entrancing passions.

Had she erred in throwing the two young people so much together? In any case, was Philip the right man for Sandy? She was reserved and unsophisticated, and his mode of living might quickly wear her down. She needed to be loved and protected; her background was a quiet, gracious home, not an hotel lounge.

It occurred to Aunt Catherine as rather odd that she should be considering the matter entirely from Sandy's angle, as though the girl were still here. The fact was that she had always allowed her love for Philip to oust the importance of Sandy's emotions. If Sandy was the anchor he needed, he must have her. The girl herself, in her generous self-effacing way, had made easy the selfish plan; yes, selfish, she told herself ruthlessly. Sandy was as much of an individual as Philip ... in many ways more so. What a dreadful pity she had let Sandy go off without a thorough discussion of the subject.

With an inward flash of pleasure, Mrs. Tremayn realized that Sandy's well-being had become as precious to her as her nephew's. She had grown to love and depend on her ... and how utterly dependable she was! Aunt Catherine longed for Sandy's telegram. She would wire

straight back telling her not to bind herself to Philip unless she was sure marriage with him was what her heart wanted.

The telegram had not arrived when Brin came to lunch at the bungalow next day with the Major.

Proprietarily, the Major poured drinks in the dining- room. He and Brin chatted desultorily till Mrs. Tremayn came in, smiling and apologetic.

"I do hope you won't mind eating out of tins - not literally, of course! But if you had let me know only half an hour ago, I might have prepared something better. I'm afraid I'm not a very resourceful housewife, Richard."

"In that case I must be sure never to spring surprise guests," he replied gallantly. "You're looking a little distraite, my dear. Is anything wrong?"

"Nothing at all. Perhaps I'm flurried, not worried."

Brin turned from the window. "Would you rather I hadn't come?"

"It's not that," she said, "only ..." Only she was used to delegating rush lunches to Sandy, but it would not be policy at the moment to say so. "Well, never mind."

"What will you drink, Catherine ?" the Major put in at once. "Nothing? Are you sure?" He took a pull at his own glass. "Brin insisted on coming here, though we had a meal ordered at the house. I suspect that when Miss Felsted stays in town he finds the day unending and depressing. Not that Brin will agree to that!"

Brin did not grin, even perfunctorily. To Aunt Catherine his mood was ominous and she grew frightened. Her eyes sought reassurance from the Major, but even his expression had an anxious quality.

"Shall we eat?" asked Aunt Catherine nervously.

For no reason at all the Major gave a short hearty laugh as he pushed in her chair.

Brin said, "Where's Sandy?"

There was a vibrant moment of silence.

"Why, I thought you knew, Brin," Aunt Catherine said brightly. "Sandy's in Durban with Philip."

His tanned cheekbones darkened. "In Durban? Since when?"

"Yesterday. I'm expecting a wire from her at any minute."

Slowly, he came forward and stood near the table. Aunt Catherine, her pulses fluttering, added, "You saw her yesterday morning. Didn't she tell you ?"

The Major, apparently stunned by woman's inventiveness and presence of mind, nodded and smiled, wordlessly.

"Who arranged it?" Brin demanded brusquely.

"Well, it was less an arrangement than a natural consequence of their engagement." Brin swore softly and she held up a hand. "Don't say it, Brin. Please wait till I've finished. And... and sit down, both of you."

The major slipped into his place at the table, but Brin swung out his chair and rested a foot on it.

"I'm waiting," he said crisply.

Her fingers closed over the bowl of a spoon. "Sandy's a sweet girl. I ... I never realized how sweet till yesterday. I've loved her for a long time now..."

"I wonder ?" - quietly from Brin.

"You think I kept her here because it was convenient to have someone to run my house and entertain Philip whenever he came."

"Didn't you?" he questioned sardonically. "I told her in the beginning that you were flinging her at Graydon, but she wouldn't listen." The Major made a sound of protest, and Brin went On, "I'm not out to make enemies, especially of you and Major Kennedy, but I've watched this foolishness too long - till it isn't foolishness any more, but downright cruelty."

"Oh, please!" she exclaimed, distressed.

"Sony, but that's the way I see it. You must have known that Sandy wasn't equipped to handle the bounder, yet you forced her on till she could see no other future for herself than as his nursemaid and sympathizer."

"Sandy isn't stupid," inserted the Major stoically. "If she didn't care for the fellow she wouldn't have become engaged to him."

"She cares for him," Brin answered, his mouth thinned and hard, "with about a tenth of her mind. All the rest of her is frozen or buttoned away." His head jerked irritably. "Perhaps at the start the idea had its points. The girl was alone, Philip needed a steadying influence and Auntie was near to spread honey. But in abandoning a decent career for money-chasing, Graydon revealed himself as worthless. He'd just as thoughtlessly dispense with a good wife in favour of one of the other sort. If he were a relative of mine," he

concluded violently, "I'd have kicked him out months ago, and as for compelling Sandy to marry him..."

"But I'm not." Aunt Catherine was nearly crying. "As soon as her telegram comes telling me where she's staying, I'm going to wire back that she must not marry Philip unless she's in love with him."

"You let her go yesterday!"

"She wanted it." Aunt Catherine had risen, and so had the Major. "I admit that I've been sadly at fault and I'll do all I can to atone ..." Her voice tailed off. She twisted and went quickly to her bedroom.

Closing the door, she leaned back against it, her palms flat against the cool wood. Humiliation burned in her face. Not only humiliation but hurt that Richard had heard Brin's accusation and perhaps misjudged her. The men were still talking; she could hear forceful tones interspersed at times with the smooth, placating remarks of the Major. Presently a door thudded and the car growled out on to the road, and away to Tegwani House. Mrs. Tremayn sank into a chair.

A small commotion at the back of the house drew her to the bedroom door, where she met the housegirl.

"A telegram, ma'am. Must the boy wait?"

"Yes. Give him some soup. There'll be a reply."

Aunt Catherine slit the envelope. Oh, dear, the wire was signed by Philip. "Sandy installed at the Chaytor. Our love to you, darling."

Pensively, she went to the lounge, but just inside the door she halted. "Richard! I thought you'd gone."

The Major got up. "I couldn't go, knowing how upset you were. I was sure that sooner or later you'd feel the need of a cup of tea, so I hung on. Is that the telegram?"

She let him take it, sighing, "It doesn't tell us anything. It isn't even from Sandy."

"If you like I'll drive you to Pietsburg and we'll contact her by telephone. We can put through a personal call from the club and stay there till it comes through."

"That's a wonderful idea, except that I doubt whether she'll do more than sleep at the Chaytor."

It would be lovely to talk to Sandy, but the regulation six minutes on the telephone would not nearly cover all she had to say, and, in any case, you can't pour your heart out over three hundred miles of telephone wire.

"I hope you weren't too shattered by Brin's outburst," the major said anxiously. "He's had some filthy moods just lately."

"I feel I'd rather not see him for a long, long time. As for the party tomorrow" - she shrugged helplessly - "surely he won't expect us now?"

"He's calling it off, as far as possible. Those he can't reach in time will be entertained to dinner, but I'll come here, if I may?"

Automatically, she murmured assent.

"Richard," she demanded suddenly, "when is the next train to Durban?"

"Next Monday, but you're not thinking..."

"I am, though." She had enlivened, considerably. "I wish it were tomorrow, but Monday will have to do. We won't bother with Pietsburg this afternoon, if I'm going to Durban."

"We can go tomorrow by car," he said.

"No" - quite firmly. "I might have guessed you'd offer to do that, but in this I have to be entirely free. You see," she continued gently, "the engagement between Sandy and Philip was my doing. I have to unravel it myself, without assistance."

"Perhaps it won't need unravelling. You've only Brin's opinion that they're not in love."

She shook her head. "And my own instinct. You must bear with me, Richard."

"But I dislike your going off there alone."

"Have you forgotten that I've travelled almost as much as you have?" Gratefully, she accepted the cup of tea he had poured. Intent upon stirring it - in spite of an aversion from sugar - she asked, "You are fond of Sandy, aren't you?"

"Very. Her modesty is appealing, and I do admire steadfastness in women."

"I'm glad." She drank and put down her cup. "Will you help me with Brin ? Try to make him understand that I feel for Sandy as though she were my... daughter."

He nodded. "And what about us - you and me, Catherine?"

"I haven't made you unhappy, as I have Sandy," she said simply. "Just now she's my first duty."

The Major accepted her verdict like a man, if not quite like a soldier.

Aunt Catherine left Pietsburg in a restless, eager state of mind. For all she saw of the country she might as well have passed through a succession of mealie fields. She read a few pages, held a one-sided conversation with a voluble Hollander whose livelihood came from merino sheep, and then pretended, in self-defence, to doze.

Her perceptions, sated by years of travel in many countries accepted Durban with equanimity. She went straight to the Ghaytor hotel, where she booked a room.

Miss Cunningham, she was told, had gone out just after lunch. Philip, she learned from his hotel, had ordered his car to be collected from the Chaytor at about the same time. They were out together, Aunt Catherine deduced, and she must eat her dinner in solitary impatience, and take her coffee on the terrace where she could watch the entrance.

Towards eleven she began to fidget. There must be someone who knew where they were. Philip had never been able to get along without crowds of friends, and possibly some of them were among these people whom she had grown tired of looking at. What was the partner's name? Clarkson. That was it, Clarkson, though she could not recall having heard his first name. A telephone book might help.

Aunt Catherine shut herself into a booth. No use telephoning the office, but there, just below "Clarkson Estates (Pty.) Ltd.", was printed "Clarkson, N., private suite", with a number beside it. She dialled. The voice that answered had timbre and suavity. Her name acted like a charm. She was not to worry. Mr. Clarkson was sure he could help her and he would come over right away. Ten minutes later Nick Clarkson had joined her in the hotel foyer.



In different circumstances his veneer might have affected Aunt Catherine. Tonight nothing would move her but the sight of Sandy.

"If you know where my nephew took Miss Cunningham, can't we get *into* touch with them?" she begged.

Nick, a nice embarrassment deepening his tones, replied, "It's very late - too late for a long country drive. I wish I could tell you more, Mrs. Tremayn."

"At least you can tell me all you know."

He hesitated. "They're engaged, aren't they? No real harm in their being out together."

"What are you hinting at, Mr. Clarkson?"

"Well —" He hung fire for a well-timed moment before plunging, with charming honesty: "I drove them out to a shack of mine by the river this afternoon. It's possible they decided to stay."

It took Aunt Catherine a complete minute to absorb this news and its implications. Her heart began to beat uncomfortably fast.

"I happen to know that my nephew's car is at his own hotel. Is there another way of getting home from this ... shack?"

She was too occupied with her own uneasy reflections to notice the drawing in of his lip and the swift gleam in his eye.

"Mrs. Tremayn," he said diffidently, "I understand your anxiety. In a way I feel responsible for Phil's absence, though I must confess that I saw little harm in an engaged couple spending an evening alone in the country. Phil asked me to drop them there, and when I enquired whether I should pick them up on my return, he said that if they

weren't at the spot where I left them it would mean they didn't need me. If it were not so late, I'd..."

A clot of anger had gathered in Aunt Catherine's chest. "Was Sandy aware of Philip's intention to compromise her?"

Nick was slightly alarmed. This moneyed aunt of Phil's was no moron. Better to ignore the final, ugly word.

"Phil didn't say, but I gathered that Sandra had not objected."

Mr. Clarkson," she said, with startling determination, "will you call a taxi and instruct the driver how to get to this place of yours ? I'm going there."

"I'll do better," he replied, bowing. "I'll take you myself."

Leaning back in Mr. Clarkson's capacious saloon, Aunt Catherine surged with outraged, bitter emotions, with Philip as their pivot. "How dare he!" she breathed in- audibly. "How *dare* he." His knowledge of Sandy made his behaviour the more monstrous. She had never doubted that his natural habit of breeding would obviate Sandy's lack of a chaperon. Mostly, he had done his shoddy best to be attentive to the girl without wounding her sensibilities, and even now it was incredible that he could have reached such despicable depths as this man in front had suggested.

The lateness of the hour and the speeding darkness fretted her nerves. Unwonted anger and mental pain had combined with the physical fatigue of an endless day to exhaust her thoroughly. When they arrived at the bridge it was all she could do to get out on to the track and follow Clarkson's flashlight.

He was courteous and helpful, his manner tinged with regret that a woman of Mrs. Tremayn's years and culture should be hauled into

this affair of Philip's. At the clearing he stopped, indicating faint lamplight through the single window.

"It's quiet," he whispered. "Is it discreet to go nearer?"

"Knock on the door," she ordered thinly.

He did so. "Are you there, Phil ? It's Nick."

A thud, and a muttered profanity. The door swung back and Philip stood there in his shirt sleeves, his face pinched and grey except for the diagonal gash in his forehead, to which clung a blood-soaked wad of cotton-wool.

"Aunt Catherine," he croaked. "Oh, my God!"

The following half-hour stayed with Aunt Catherine for ever. The dim little room with Philip slumped one side of the table and herself, none too erect, sitting opposite, while "that man" hovered in the shadows, silent and watchful. Sandy was gone into the African night, no one knew where. Philip had followed, calling her back, had hit a tree and passed out. Though nearly an hour had elapsed before consciousness returned, he had stumbled down to the bridge, but by then, of course Sandy had vanished.

Too sickened to ask questions, Aunt Catherine cleaned his wound and dressed it. Gripping the back of a chair, she faced him.

"I'm praying with all I've got that Sandy managed a lift into Durban. If anything has happened to her, Philip," her voice shook, "I'm finished with you, for ever."

There was a short, wretched pause.

"Shall we go back now ?" he said, not looking at her. "It's two o'clock. You must be very tired, darling."

Sharing the back seat of the car with him she felt not only weary, but ill from nightmare imaginings about Sandy.

Dawn was lifting and fleecy wisps of mist drifted over the beaches when they drew into the courtyard of the Chaytor. A night-boy drowsed on the terrace and was persuaded by the usual means to conduct Mrs. Tremayn up the back way to her room. He had been on duty since eleven the night before but had seen nothing of Miss Cunningham.

"Don't come with me, Philip," said Aunt Catherine, unsteadily.

"But I want to make certain about Sandy."

"I'll ring you.. .later."

Her colourless, lined face stabbed his contrite heart, but he dared not kiss her. Aunt Catherine as she had looked in the shack was a person he had no desire to see again. So he said good night and went away to confront the cold hate of Nick Clarkson. ,

Aunt Catherine lay in her bed and watched the grey mist dissolve. With every second it became lighter; first a subdued radiance, then shafts of pale flame that changed small clouds into smooth round birds' breasts of wondrous softness and colouring; and finally the sun, blazoning the birth of a new day.

A boy brought early tea and she told him to make immediate enquiries about Miss Cunningham. As she expected, he came back shaking his head. For the first time in her life she felt appallingly lonely and unequal to the problem just ahead. If only Richard were here to take charge. Her head ached and when she sat up the room gyrated till she had to close her eyes and sink back again. What was she to do ? Who else could she go to but the police ?

Desperately, she reached for the box of tablets which she always carried in her bag, and swallowed a double dose. Late hours invariably disorganized her, and such a night of fear and suspense was more than any woman of fifty could sustain without consequences. What wouldn't she give to have Sandy's cool, gentle fingers on her brow. Oh, Sandy, where are you ?

The tablets worked two ways; the pain in her head receded and she slept.

When she awoke at noon Philip was at her bedside. The plaster on his forehead roused her to instant awareness.

"Any news ?" she asked quickly.

"Not yet." His hazel glance pleaded. "I consulted the police and they're doing all the usual routine things first... telephoning the couple of townships and sending a slow car over the whole route. I... I think she must have walked all the way to the little town we passed before dipping into the valley, and put up there for the night. If... if she's all right she'll have to come back here for money and clothes. She had nothing with her."

"How *could* you, Philip ?" she said bleakly.

It came out, in hurried, muffled phrases. Nick Clarkson's need for money, his own reluctance to hurry Sandy into marriage. Philip had been against the log-cabin trick, but Sandy's awkwardness over an encounter with Clarkson's wife had annoyed him. He'd aimed to teach her a lesson, not to harm her in any way. A few drinks had unbalanced him, but when she ran out into the darkness he'd thought she would not get far before he caught her up. Then that damned tree

...

Aunt Catherine saw the slight figure flying along the path, heart frantic, lungs bursting.

"Please go now, Philip," she said abruptly, "and don't come here again till I send for you. You arranged for the police to get in touch with me ?"

"Yes."

"Very well. Please go."

Resolutely, she got up and dressed. First she would go down to the terrace and drink some black coffee. After that... well, she didn't intend to stay idle while Sandy was still missing. She was fresh again, and ready for action. , As it happened, no further action was required of Aunt Catherine. As she sipped her coffee within sight of the Esplanade a battered car stopped right in front of the hotel and a homespun-looking man helped an equally rustic- clothed *woman* to extricate herself from the vehicle. The two shook hands, and the half-shy lift of the woman's honey-fair head turned Aunt Catherine's heart. The small person in ample flowered cotton that reached half-way between knee and ankle was unmistakably Sandy.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

AUNT CATHERINE fingered the engagement-ring as though she would rather have used tongs.

"Of course I'll give it back to him. I suppose I shall have to have a long talk with Philip, though at the moment I hardly know what line to take. The whole business disgusts me, as much with myself as with him. I treated you abominably, Sandy. I hope you'll forgive me and allow me to make up for using your youth and innocence so badly. I feel I never want to let you out of my sight again."

Sandy smoothed her clean white skirt, dusted a hair from the shoulder of her scarlet blouse, and turned her back on the dressing-table mirror.

"There. I'm a new woman."

"With shadows in your eyes that make me want to cry."

"Don't be silly," said Sandy gently. "It's all over and as soon as we leave Durban we shall forget it."

"I shan't forget. You were never in love with Philip, but out of a distorted sense of gratitude to me you were willing to sacrifice all hope of a true marriage and tie yourself to a man whom you despised."

"Not despised ... pitied. I really was fond of him." Her lips strained into a smile. "We both thought he needed me, but he doesn't. Can't we discuss something else? What about you and the Major?"

"That must be deferred till we get back to Tegwani."

As she folded Mrs. Pienaar's dress ready for the hotel laundry, Sandy answered evenly, "I'm not going back with you, Aunt Catherine."

The older woman's hands dropped hard on to the arms of her wicker chair. "But, darling, you must. Tegwani is your home. Where else could you go?"

"I came to you as a typist-companion. If you've given up writing you won't have any use for a typist, and the Major will be all the companion you'll need."

"I shall be heartbroken if you refuse to consider me as the next best thing to a parent, Sandy, and I'm certain Richard feels the same."

Sandy's throat contracted. "He's a dear, but he wouldn't really enjoy having a second woman about the place. No man would. I'm going to try for a job in some other town."

"I won't have it!" said Aunt Catherine flatly. "I shall not go back to Tegwani unless you go with me."

From which decision Sandy could not shift her.

It was after dinner, when they sat in the comparative stillness of Sandy's balcony, that Sandy took advantage of the darkness to frame an enquiry.

"How did the party go last Saturday?"

"Brin called it off."

"Oh! Why?"

"We had a disagreement- over you."

Sandy's heart began its foolish revolutions. She said her voice roughening, "I'm not so important, How did it happen?"



Briefly, Aunt Catherine explained. "Brin's an aggravating egotist," she ended. "I've a notion that he had planned to announce his own engagement that evening. Katrina must be seething."

Sandy sat immobile, staring out at the dark, molten rim of the sea.

"We'll have a holiday," cried Aunt Catherine suddenly. "There's a village called Umbulu along the coast at a river mouth. About fifty whites live there, mostly retired people who are fond of fishing, and one of them keeps a tiny hotel. I stayed in it once when I was working on sea and river weeds for a school primer. There isn't a railway, but a hired car will take us." She added warmly, excitedly, "I'm longing for us to be alone again, as we were a year ago at Tegwani. I'll write to Richard telling him our plans, and then we'll not even think about the citrus farm till we're tired of Umbulu."

"The Major won't like it."

"Perhaps not. But you see, darling, I happen to care for you as much, in a different way, as I care for the Major. I should never have a second's peace if you went wandering round the country doing office work for odd people. Until you marry, Sandy, your home is with me."

Sandy was not against the proposal. A peaceful holiday in undemanding company sounded about as near as she could hope to get to heaven, and when it was over she would still have all the time in the world to decide her future. Dimly, she knew that Aunt Catherine was disappointed in her lack of affectionate response. But the experience with Philip seemed to have dragged something vital right out of her - perhaps her heart, or maybe just the last cherished tatters of her girlhood. Whatever it was, it helped to dilute her feeling for Brin. Only when the picture of eternal stark and loveless years stretched before her was the agony intolerable, and such lapses could not help but lessen in time.

Next morning Aunt Catherine had a final hour with Philip. She came back from his hotel sad and silent. With little persuasion he had agreed to return to England and seek a position in the offices of his father's engineering concern. Aunt Catherine had decided against giving him a large sum; instead, her solicitors would send him a yearly allowance to supplement his own earnings. It was dreadful, having to treat Philip as a dishonourable boy.

Straight after lunch she and Sandy began to pack sharing a mood of relief at quitting the Miami of South Africa.

Umbulu displayed yet another aspect of the miraculous natural loveliness so wantonly lavished over the whole sub-continent. The village - it was hardly more - lay to the left of the river, cut off from it by a massive cliff whose wooded slopes reached right down into the sea. On the other side of the river-mouth a second headland jutted, forming with the first a green gateway to the Umbulu river.

The white population at Umbulu were the most friendly and casual group it was possible to find. Half of them were retired South Africans and the rest was made up of European writers, artists and one or two English business folk taking a long vacation. To her own surprise, Aunt Catherine was instantly popular. She had never stayed long enough in one district to make it worth while to join societies and wear a literary nimbus; in fact it would have alarmed her to learn that she had earned one. But here, in secluded Umbulu, her work was known and respected. Informal dinners were given in her honour at which discussion became lively and full of interest. Somebody or other's car stood always at her disposal for a trip along the river road or a tour of the plantations, and only rarely were Aunt Catherine and Sandy alone.

When they had been a week at Umbulu, the Major sent on a packet of correspondence, among which was a letter for Sandy from Paul Adriaan. He and his Ginette, he wrote, were now installed in a school in South-west Africa. The job was exacting and helpers few, but they were tremendously happy working together. He hoped Sandy would keep in touch with them, and finished with a humorous reference to her aptitude for languages, particularly Afrikaans.

Aunt Catherine had pushed her own letters aside and was smiling over the Major's covering note.

"He asks when we're going home," she said. "He's coming to fetch us. Brin and Katrina send their regards. Katrina and Conrad de Lange won several prizes in the Pietsburg Horse Show. Katrina rode Brin's horses and Conrad his own." She turned the page, read to the end and looked up. "How soon, Sandy?"

"I'd like to stay on at Umbulu for a while," came the low-toned answer. "Let the Major come for you at once."

"I wouldn't leave you here unless you promised to come to Tegwani on a certain date. Besides" - her glance bent to the letter in her hand - "now that your marriage is off, Richard is anxious to go full speed ahead with ours. I shall need your help, darling."

Sandy said, "It would be lovely if you were married quietly here. I'm sure the Major would agree to it."

"I would, too, but I've no wish to antagonize Brin further. We have to be neighbours, remember." After a long, uneasy moment, she added hesitantly, "He won't carp about Philip any longer. In fact, it's my guess that he'll leave you alone or at the most be cool and agreeable." Sandy's unhappy silence prompted her to tack on: "We'll go on as we are till next weekend."

There were times when Sandy felt herself growing hot and a little angry. Why couldn't Aunt Catherine be satisfied with Major Kennedy as a substitute for Philip ? Sandy was tired of living in a cage and posturing for other people. She would finish with Tegwani, cut off her relationship with Aunt Catherine, for it too closely twined with pain to be supportable. But such thoughts crumpled when she saw devotion in the older woman's eyes, and she turned cold at the idea of spurning the only maternal love she had ever known. Where would it all end ?

She was playing hard. Swimming twice a day, tennis most afternoons, a long ride when she could borrow a horse, and late nights. Exhaustion took the edge from her despair.

On Friday afternoon Aunt Catherine sat too long on the headland, sketching the daylight melting into the hills. A wind bowed the grass and slim ferns, and did its worst with her before she noticed its cool breath. On Saturday morning she was hoarse with coughing and her temperature had passed the hundred.

No doctor practised in Umbulu, but a retired naval surgeon lived in a *rondavel*-shaped dwelling overlooking the shore. He had been known to yield to blandishments of the subtler sort, but Sandy used no wiles. She asked his help and he began a testy reply which thinned out as he gazed down the clear, anxious young face. Growling, he yanked open a drawer, threw out old letters, cartridges, a handful of cowry shells, a camera and two threadbare ties, before triumphantly exhibiting his stethoscope. Sandy suspected that he hid it purposely to deter too frequent calls upon his time.

Over Aunt Catherine he shook his grizzled head. A nasty chill, he pronounced, and she'd better behave if she didn't want pneumonia. Sandy was to send a boy over for some medicine and take the temperature every hour. She must acquaint him with the slightest rise.

"I believe I have some sulphonamide," he grumbled, "but we'll hope she won't need it."

Only a few hours later Aunt Catherine did need it, and Sandy was forced to despatch a telegram to the Major, though she was sceptical of its reaching him before Monday morning. Residents flocked in with offers of help, and every few hours a woman among them sat with Mrs. Tremayn to release Sandy for a meal or a change of air.

Sunday passed in a haze of worry and fatigue, but by the end of the day Aunt Catherine's temperature had lowered and she was weakly apologizing for causing such an unpleasant diversion. She still looked desperately ill, and Sandy stayed in the sick room all that , night, alternately dozing and listening to the other's breathing. When the boy brought morning tea she felt as though she had spent the hours on a first-class binge.

"You're to go down to the beach this morning," said Aunt Catherine, " and bathe with the others. After that you must rest. I won't have you stifling in here with me. I shall be quite happy alone, and perhaps later that bear of a doctor will let me sit up and read."

"I'll stay till he comes."

"No, Sandy. Likely as not he'll stagger up the stairs after his midday drink, and you'll have lost the morning. Please ... I don't want to have to worry about you."

"I'm all right. Now you're getting better I shall soon catch up on my sleep."

Aunt Catherine lamented, "You're awfully obstinate, Sandy."

"Be thankful you escaped pneumonia," Sandy told her practically, "and let other things slip for a while. You had me frantic, you know."

"Poor child! What a bungle I've made of the holiday which was intended to help you forget the evils of Durban. I think you need the tranquillity of Tegwani - we both do."

Sandy offered a smile and nothing more.

To quiet Aunt Catherine she went down for a quick bathe and climbed one of the slopes to sit above the sea and light a cigarette. Odd to think that a year ago she had not tasted the bitter flavour of tobacco, and never, before Durban, had she purchased a packet of cigarettes for her own use. With women, perpetual smoking was less a pleasure than an anodyne, she reflected. It helped, whenever the mind became dangerously clear, to tackle the physical task of setting a flame to a cigarette and inhaling fumes to fog the brain.

Back at the hotel she learned that the doctor still had not shown up, but Aunt Catherine was happily immersed with a local naturalist in an earnest discussion of the small fauna abounding in the district, and Sandy was able to slip into her own room and stretch luxuriously on the bed. Her wrist-watch said five to twelve; she could snatch an hour before lunch.

She awoke feeling hollow and uneasy. The sun had left this side of the building and a breeze stirred the net at the window. It was a quarter to five. Heavens, this was making up for lost sleep with a vengeance. Aunt Catherine would begin to wonder whether she had passed into a genuine coma.

She got into a clean print dress and took a hasty glance at herself in the mirror. Oh dear, only wakefulness could obliterate the heavy look round her eyes, and how utterly pale she was, in spite of the light tan.

She knocked on Aunt Catherine's door and opened it.

"Oh ... I'm so sorry," she said, at first aware only of the Major seated beside the bed. Then she saw someone big and broad rise from a chair in the balcony, and for a second her eyes closed, burning with sleep and the need for control.

"Come in," invited Brin, entering himself. "I trust you are well, Miss Cunningham?"

Sandy ignored him; she was incapable of anything else. But she contrived a smile for the Major.

Aunt Catherine was sitting up, prettily wrapped in a pink wool dressing-jacket, a spot of high Colour in each cheek. Apart from a natural embarrassment, she was enjoying the situation and eager to share the limelight with Sandy.

"Richard and Brin arrived about twenty minutes ago," she said brightly. "The telegram reached Tegwani this morning and they left at once. I'm so glad you had such a nice sleep, darling. These men wouldn't believe you were in bed so late in the afternoon, but I insisted that you should not be disturbed. You don't appear much better for the rest, but perhaps you're hungry ?"

"Not particularly." Sandy moved round so that her back was to Brin. 'What did the doctor say ?"

"The man's an idiot. He said I must stay in bed till next weekend."

"Nothing idiotic about that. You don't realize how bad you've been, even if it didn't last long. We can't risk a relapse."

"That's what I've been telling her," put in the Major.

"Take me back to Tegwani," pleaded Aunt Catherine. "I'll stay in bed there, I promise you."

"Why not?" - from Brin. "We can rig up my car as a sort of ambulance, and," with a sardonic nod at the back of Sandy's head, "you'll have a nurse along. I'll guarantee an average speed of fifty-five, so we shan't have more than five hours on the road."

The Major was pessimistic. "A great deal can happen in five hours. We're in the stormy season, and the car may not be entirely draught-proof."

"I didn't mean us to start out at once," said Brin a little curtly. "This is Monday. If Catherine's temperature remains normal I don't see why we shouldn't leave on Wednesday morning. With care, there should be no danger."

"We could put it to the doctor," suggested the Major.

"He'll stick to his guns," guessed Sandy.

"I'm afraid he will," sighed Aunt Catherine, "but we don't have to obey him."

"He got you through and I think you should."

"So do I," contended the Major.

Aunt Catherine smiled past Sandy, at Brin. "It's you and me, Brin, against these two. Ours ought to be the stronger combination but I wonder if it is?"

He shrugged and moved towards the door. "I can use a drink. I'll be down in the lounge, if anyone's interested."

For a few minutes Sandy stayed on in the bedroom, but after polite exchanges with the Major she gave in to Aunt Catherine's plea that she go and have something to eat.



Sandy was not hungry in the sense of wanting a substantial meal. She needed food but the thought of it sickened her. It was Brin, of course.

He was sitting in the hall-lounge and, as she came down the stairs, rose lazily to meet her. In silence they went out to the small terrace where the tea-tables were being cleared. He seated her, took a chair on the other side of the circular table and raised his feet to the low cement wall. A boy came for their order.

"What would you like ?" Brin asked her.

"Tea and a piece of toast."

"Mrs. Tremayn told us you'd had no lunch."

"If I eat much now I shan't be able to face dinner," she returned coolly. "Tea and toast will do."

To the boy Brin said, "Ask the cook to make a small savoury *omelette*, and bring thin toast and butter and a pot of tea."

Brin stared over the garden - it comprised a lawn patch-worked with orange and yellow cannas - and beyond the narrow rocky road to where the grass sloped down to the beach. Detachedly, he got out cigarettes and inserted one between his lips.

"May I have one ?" she requested quietly.

"Certainly - after you've eaten." His head twisted. The arm which rested on the table shifted, as he reached for her fingers. "Been going the pace, haven't you? I don't remember the smoke stains."

The hand withdrew into her lap. "Why did you come with the Major ?"

"He was worried, and I wasn't over busy. We thought my car might be more roomy than his for bringing you back."

"You could have lent it to him ... but you know best. How is Katrina?"

"Exploding with health and enthusiasm and disgusted with me for pushing off at a time so vital to her happiness and future. She sent you her love - and commiseration."

This was his first allusion to Philip, but if he made one more, just one, Sandy told herself, she would go to her bedroom and stay there till he had left Umbulu. She could remain cold and aloof with him so long as he kept clear of that subject. Brin knew nothing but what Aunt Catherine had written to the Major: Sandy and Philip had decided they were incompatible, and the engagement was at an end.

He said, "You've changed - something's missing."

"Only my lunch," she answered, "and here comes the omelette to make up for it."

It was a good omelette, light, well-seasoned and easy to eat. Brin helped her out with the toast, munching almost saturninely as he watched her fork up the yellow wads. He spoke less than usual and seemed fed up, a mood which strengthened Sandy's resolve, though it also disquieted her. She had encountered Brin's pleasure and anger, his sarcasm and, rarely, his gentleness; but here showed a new facet that savoured acidly of indifference. She did not like it.

"Why are you so keen to stay on in Umbulu?" he enquired as she poured a second cup of tea.

"Keen?" She looked up. "What makes you think I am?"

"Your voice, when you virtuously asserted the doctor's right to dictate to Mrs. Tremayn. What is there here to attract a girl ?" Like you, his tone added.

"The surroundings are beautiful and the atmosphere peaceful. And, being English, I can't help but have a slight yearning towards the sea. There's satisfaction in living within sound of the waves - ask any of the Umbulu residents."

"I'm not interested in their stale theories. There's no satisfaction in living anywhere if you're at war with yourself."

"Maybe not. It's an aspect I've hardly considered. I relinquished that state of mind some time ago."

"Congratulations," he returned a trifle sharply, and went back to contemplation of the garden.

Sandy sipped her tea and watched a sandpiper dart over the hoed earth between the flowers. She sensed that he was vexed by her unresponsiveness, yet unwilling to rouse her by his customary mocking measures. Annoying if he was moved by a revival of pity. She felt none at all for herself. To prove it she expanded about the pleasures of living in Umbulu.

"The people here are so friendly and helpful," she said. "They don't despise one for being ignorant. Intellectually, I've learned quite a lot."

"I've already noticed the preponderance of men," he admitted drily, "and Mrs. Tremayn mentioned your conquest of the unconquerable doctor."

Her eyes glinted with sudden, unreasoning irritation, but she stemmed an inclination to ventilate it. She would not gratify him with the girlish kind of display which he handled so ruthlessly.

"May I have that cigarette now?" she asked.

He gave it to her and struck a match, his forehead drawn into a frown which her next remark did not dispel.

"If you find it so distasteful here you don't have to stay, Brin. Aunt Catherine has pulled round so quickly that we might persuade the Major to go back with you and bring his own car next weekend - if you'd be happier that way."

"You think I would?"

"Well, you certainly smiled more often at Tegwani."

"Really?" He rubbed out his cigarette with such unnecessary violence that for a startled second Sandy imagined that she had him at a disadvantage. "What's happened to you ?" he demanded brusquely.

"You know well enough."

He gestured with exasperation and curbed anger. "It's more than that footling affair with Graydon. You've hardened. He couldn't do that to you."

Sandy answered him calmly, without the tremor of an eyelid. "This is me," she said. "At Tegwani I was hemmed in by gratitude to Aunt Catherine and your sense of property. At last I'm free."

He laughed, not entirely spontaneously, and leant on the table, quizzing her. "Are you trying to make me believe that because this is Umbulu and not the orange farm you're a bigger and better woman ? Perhaps I'm prejudiced, but I can't see much difference in your

relationship with Mrs. Tremayn. She's riding you just as hard, but she's changed reins, and your new situation looks like being as arid as the last."

"How can you act so pleasantly to Aunt Catherine and talk about her in that way when she isn't here to take you up ? You never could understand our friendship..."

"I hope I'm wrong," he interrupted softly, tauntingly, "but up there in the bedroom before you came in I got the impression that Sandy was closer than a devoted daughter. In her middle years Mrs. Tremayn has a deadly failing. Her nephew was one result of it and you're building up to become the second." His hand rose to prevent the words which parted her lips. "Auntie is a woman I could admire if she'd only rest content in her childlessness and allow you to use your own mind ..."

Afterwards Sandy could not have described how she did it. She heard the smack, saw her own spread hand held aloft and felt it stinging. But I couldn't have, her dazed brain told her; I couldn't do that to Brin, because I love him. Brin, don't look like that. Let me explain ...

But he was gone, striding along the terrace and into the hotel bearing with him the sting of her fingers on his cheek. A native boy, his eyes big with curiosity, peeped from a recess; otherwise the terrace was deserted. Sandy dropped back into her chair, feeling like a particularly loathsome species of fishwife.

Although Aunt Catherine was nearly normal by Wednesday the question of returning to Tegwani on that day was left closed. For one thing, she had lost her ally, for Brin never again entered the bedroom, and he made no attempt to divert the Major from the doctor's dictum.

Brin was out most of the day. He breakfasted with Major Kennedy, bathed, and often joined another of the hotel residents for fishing in the sweet waters of the Umbulu river. He returned after dark, changed his clothes and dined early. When Sandy and the Major came to their table for four, they would pass Brin dining with someone else, and all through the meal Sandy had to hold herself rigidly averted from where he sat. Later he might be encountered in the lounge as she passed through for a final breath of air before bed. If he were looking her way, he would bestow a distant nod, as if she were a fellow guest. All of which made her thoroughly wretched, for it was she who hedged and avoided, not he. Ostensibly, he was having a grand week's holiday. Through him a polo match was arranged and Sandy experienced the delicious terror of seeing him thunder over the turf and swipe home some clean goals.

On Friday evening Aunt Catherine came down to dinner; in fact she floated down on the Major's arm about an hour before dinner and sat with him in a draughtless corner of the lounge. Thus it was that Brin, back from a shooting trip, was buttonholed and invited to dine with them, so that when Sandy appeared, attired in her newest evening gown because dress was usual at the weekends, it was Brin who seated her and called for a cocktail.

He was in a good humour, the sort of mood she associated with Katrina. Oddly, he mentioned her almost at once.

"I wasn't aware this place had a post office till this morning, when I got a letter from Katrina."

"Don't say you haven't written to her since you've been here!" exclaimed Aunt Catherine.

"Oh yes. I wrote last Tuesday to the hotel in Pietsburg, but I had a stamp in my pocket and left the letter with the hall boy to post. It

seems I omitted the name of this hotel and she addressed me at the post office. A boy came over to find me."

"Is Katrina furious with you for staying so long?"

"Furious?" he grinned. "She's always bubbling about something, but one doesn't take her too seriously."

"She's a refreshing person," Aunt Catherine commented.

He agreed. "A marvellous girl, without kinks. I've been fond of Katrina since we were kids. As far as I can remember she's always met others on equal terms - never fallen back on being a woman to get out of a spot."

"But isn't their naughtiness half the charm about women?"

"Is it?" He slanted a glance at Sandy, her profile young and smooth, the stem of the glass circling between her fingers. "I prefer to know where I am with a woman. If Katrina gave me a sock on the jaw, she'd expect the same back, with interest."

The Major laughed, and so did Aunt Catherine.

"The interest, no doubt, would consist of kisses," she stated, unashamed, "and I'm sure you'd pay that first and forget the capital. I'm looking forward to seeing Katrina again."

"It won't be long." Brin turned to the Major. "Shall we get away tomorrow - or Sunday?"

"You've hung on for our sake. Let's make it tomorrow."

"Does that mean we shall have to spend this evening over suitcases? Did you hear, Sandy? No dancing tonight."

Sandy slipped her glass back on to the table. "I don't see why not. It won't take me long to pack your bag. I can do it straight after early tea in the morning."

Contrary to habit, Aunt Catherine was silent. The Major looked thoughtfully down his nose, and it was left to Brin to frame an abrupt enquiry.

"Who's going to pack for *you* ?"

"I'll do it myself, when I'm ready to leave Umbulu."

"You'd better be ready with the rest of us at ten o'clock tomorrow morning."

She managed a taut smile. "Are you threatening me, Brin? Do I have to make myself more clear?"

"You do," he said bluntly.

"Very well. I'm not going to Tegwani, tomorrow or ever. I'm not penniless and I've made friends here. I intend to stay."

"But, darling..." began Aunt Catherine.

"Listen, my child..." said Brin.

She interrupted them both. "I'm sorry for hurting you, Aunt Catherine, but I'm determined. If I were to go back with you I'd be miserable, and that would distress you. I'll come to Pietsburg for the weekend when you and the Major are married, and maybe you two will come this way for a holiday sometimes."

Coolly, Brin nodded towards the dining-room. "The girl's crazy. She'll feel more normal after dinner. Shall we go in?"





## CHAPTER TWELVE

THE clock had moved round to nine-thirty and Aunt Catherine was back in bed. Sandy had left her with a reading-lamp and a book. The older woman's persuasions and regrets she had answered with a smile, and she thought that Aunt Catherine was, at last, privately acknowledging herself defeated. Sandy's obstinacy in this instance was not so much natural as desperate; she was inwardly convinced that her whole integrity depended on a clean break with Tegwani.

The Friday night crowd had gathered in the lounge, and the radiogram invited dancers into the cleared dining-room. For so small an hotel they contrived ingeniously; there was even a space rigged up with a portable bar and buffet.

Sandy met friends and danced for an hour, then slipped through the darkened writing-room on to the stoep at the back of the hotel.

A couple of house-boys squatting below in the dust clicked softly to each other. Bantu was a pretty language, Sandy reflected; one she would like to learn some day. Not many white people spoke it; the policeman, the postmaster, the old naval doctor ... and Brin. Everything led back to Brin. Even the skyful of stars and the silver arc of the moon took her to the night of the *braaivleis* when they had strolled together down to the river, and he had spoken quietly and with meaning, and stirred her hair with his breath. Difficult to recall her reactions; agitation, delight and other adolescent emotions. An hour later Katrina had burst into her life and altered its perspective unrecognizably. In a year, Sandy tried to assure herself, Tegwani would have receded. She would be gone from this district.

She turned to re-enter the writing-room and stilled a scream. "Lord," said Brin's voice in the dark, "what an adventure ! I noticed you disappear into that room and followed. You must have eyes like a

cat's to miss those massive chunks of furniture. I nearly broke my neck."

She recovered swiftly. "I know the room well. You could have asked for a lamp or struck a match."

"And had you vaulting the wall and disappearing into the undergrowth? Besides," his tone lowered confidentially, "you might decide to smite the other cheek and I'd rather you did it in the dark."

"Her head bent. "That was ... dreadful of me. I ... I can't think what made me do it."

"I can. When I'd got over the shock of a nice little girl behaving like a temperamental actress I was rather pleased with you. You're coming alive, little one, in the most astonishing way. But I warn you, if you try it on again I'll punish you for it."

"Punish me? How?"

"I haven't decided - kiss you, probably."

"Oh," she said foolishly, and looked out at the stars.

After a long tranquil moment he said, "Sea sounds inviting, doesn't it ? Ever bathed by starlight ?"

"No. I'd be scared to, alone."

"Would you like to try now ?"

"Now?" she echoed, heart hammering. "With you?"

"With no one else. Shoot upstairs and change. Use the back way and meet me on the road in ten minutes."

"But... but I can't."

"Why ? Afraid of the cold ?"

"Of course not. But ... well, people here don't go bathing in the moonlight."

"That's obvious, my pretty," he returned with a tantalizing drawl, "but you're your own boss now - free and untrammelled. You told me so, yourself. Run along and prove it."

Because it was Brin who jeered, Brin who dared her, Sandy had to obey. She whispered, "All right!" and vanished.

In less than ten minutes they met beneath a pepper tree, each wrapped in a robe. Holding her arm just above the elbow he guided her over the grass to the curve of beach, which appeared peculiarly white and dead, while the black living sea curled over it and splintered its foam.

They dropped their robes, but he hesitated.

"It's senseless to go in if you're hot."

"I'm not. I'm shivering with fright. Do let me get it over."

He laughed, grabbed her wrist and ran. Sandy gasped and struck out, felt ice grip her chest and legs, and then a sense of utter exhilaration.

Brin stayed close, his arms moving lazily. His teeth flashed white, his hand shoved back his hair. Sandy wished she could see him, hair spiky, rocky face glistening, his expression ordinary and pleasant; only if he knew himself visible his mouth and eyes would mock at the spectacle of Brin Masterson, citrus planter, bathing with Sandy Cunningham.

"Slow down," he bade her. "You'll wear yourself out."

And a few minutes later: "You've had enough. Slacken off and I'll take you in"

This, thought Sandy, forgetting everything but the strong arms that supported her, was the nearest thing to ecstasy. Idiotically, she yearned for the world to swing round, so that they would be heading out to sea and glorious oblivion.

"Look out, nitwit, you'll graze your knees."

She laughed, breathlessly, stumbling up the beach beside him. He threw her wrap round her and knotted the girdle, dragged on his own robe and made her run up the beach to the back garden of the hotel. There, he pushed her on to a seat.

"Warm enough?"

"Burning," she said.

"Good. Wait here and I'll bring you something."

She hugged her knees and rocked in a maze of confusion and dangerous joy. He brought back two glasses and gave her the one containing hot milk with a dash of whisky.

"I put in three lumps of sugar," he said. "How does it taste?"

"Ambrosial." The drink, his proximity and the cool, sea-smelling night.

"What would Auntie say if she could see you now?"

"Aunt Catherine's coming on since she's had to receive the Major in negligee. But I mustn't stay long. Thank you for showing me how lovely night bathing can be."

"I've shown you other things as well, haven't I ?"

So very much, breathed her heart.

"Yes," she answered. "The *braaivleis*, the orange farm..

"Pity you're not coming back with us tomorrow," he said casually. "According to the letter I had from Katrina this morning she's arranged all sorts of high jinks for next week." He waited, but when the anticipated retort failed to come, went on, "Still, if Tegwani depresses you it's unfair to keep on badgering. You'll write to us sometimes, won't you ? I'm sure Katrina will write to you."

She trembled and he grabbed her glass.

"Go to bed," he ordered. "You'll catch cold."

He accompanied her as far as the servants' entrance, gave the top of her head a patronizing tap and said good night. As she stumbled up the stairway on leaden legs, she heard his soft whistling and the scrape of a match.

Sandy omitted breakfast next morning. Her excuse was the packing, though the suitcase and the hatbox were filled before the boy roamed the corridor clanking the Chinese gong. She nibbled a rye biscuit from Aunt Catherine's tray, and straightened the bed while she went for a bath. It was as if she had toothache or a badly poisoned finger. She had to keep moving between her own room and Aunt Catherine's, searching the empty wardrobe for missed items and

peering beneath the bed for wandering slippers. Anything to ward off a climax to pain.

The Major sent a boy up for the cases and when he had gone again the room was shorn, already untenanted. From the window Sandy saw Brin's tourer swerve into the drive. He got out, dug his hands into his pockets and took a turn on the lawn. He looked so virile and uncaring that she had to jerk away.

Aunt Catherine's cheeks were pink, but her eyes were tired and anxious. Gently, Sandy brushed and set the fine, greying hair.

"I forbid you to cry," she said, "particularly in front of Brin. He detests a weeping woman."

"How do you know?"

"Katrina is everything he admires and one can't imagine her tearful. Cheer up, Aunt Catherine. I'll soon be coming to your wedding."

"I'm going to miss you so frightfully, Sandy."

"And I you. But you'll have the Major and I shall work. You can visualize me typing for the writers here, just as I did for you."

"But you'll be homeless, darling. It wrenches my heart to think of you without a home. I'm not selfish about you any more. I ... I care too much for you. I can't be happy if you're not."

"We'll both settle down as soon as this parting is over. There, you look lovely; no one would guess you'd had a week in bed. Shall we go now?"

Good-byes had been gone through the night before, and the Major had lavished the tips. Out on the terrace the men were smoking. The Major moved at once to install Aunt Catherine in the back seat, but

Brin remained leaning against a post, his smile trained enigmatically upon Sandy's contracted little face.

She passed him and bent to give Aunt Catherine a final kiss. As she stepped back the Major threw discipline to the winds, rested his hands upon her shoulders and touched his lips to her cheek; after which shameful display he took his blush inside the car to his future wife.

Brin tipped his cigarette into a flower-bed.

"Does it feel good to be seeing the last of us ?" he asked slyly. Sandy was too near to tears to reply before he spoke again. "It isn't too late to change your mind."

She shook her head. "I'm not doing that any more."

"No message for anyone."

"I ... I'll be meeting you all at the ... wedding."

"So you will" - sarcastically. "I do love a wedding, don't you ? Vicarious emotion, good food, too much drink and a probable hangover."

"That's one aspect, I suppose."

"What other aspect is there, for the onlooker?" He **was** conversing idly, needing no response. "By the way, what do you want done with the dog ... the lethal chamber?"

"No! Oh, no," she exclaimed, distressed. "Aunt Catherine will keep him - unless you'd like to have him back?"

He shrugged. "He's not a man's dog. Katrina might take to him."



The thrust drove home clean as a lancet. She went white and stricken. Abruptly, Brin shifted, his mouth tight and purposeful. He flung open the nearside door of the car and enclosed her forearm in a grip of steel.

"Get in," he bit out. "Get in, or I'll lift you in."

She had no time or strength to struggle. The door slammed on her dress, the key snicked in the lock and he strode round to his own seat.

"Brin," cried Aunt Catherine. "Brin, what are you doing!"

He thumbed the starter, slipped into gear and the car shot out on to the road much to the amazement of a young local man, who leapt back into the hedge and stared after the cloud of red dust as if it were smoke from the devil.

For ten minutes Brin drove breakneck. Then the Major ventured a mild reminder.

"Fifty should be plenty, Brin. If the door's locked, Sandy can't make a getaway."

Aunt Catherine gave a nervous, excited laugh. "You still have some clothes at the bungalow, darling, and the hotel will send on everything left in your room."

"Brin's hateful," choked Sandy, without turning. "*Hate- full*"

He wound between an ox-team and a string of itinerant donkeys, nudged more comfortably into his seat and let out an ironic sigh.

"What the deuce," he said. "Someone had to act. Surely you realized how unlikely it was that we'd abandon you to a horde of half-submerged artists and novelists? Simmer down, there's a good girl, and use some of that gratitude you own such a fund of. If Tegwani

gives you the misery, let's all have it together." Kindly he added, "Later on we'll stop and you shall have a cup of coffee. I also managed to wring a few sugar cookies from the hotel chef, especially for you. Aren't I a generous Uncle Brin?"

For the next couple of hours Sandy was consumed by an anger that hurt right through her mind and body. But such a concentration of fury cannot help but become muted when energy drains. As the view through the window gradually changed from luscious coastal growth into dry scrub-crustured veld, the knot loosened in Sandy's throat. For the present she had to accept the inevitable. Next time she left Tegwani no one, not even Aunt Catherine, would know her destination.

When they stopped for a picnic lunch Brin baited her, but not unmercifully, though he retained the air of maddening superiority.

In the late afternoon the atmosphere cooled and Sandy had to make a lightning choice between Brin's jacket and one of Aunt Catherine's rugs. Dusk shrouded the white cement pillars of Tegwani as they entered the estate. Brin had decided to drive straight through to Tegwani House where his boys would soon have a hot meal ready, but Aunt Catherine, on her own and Sandy's behalf, demurred.

"We're tired, Brin. We've both endured enough for one day, and we'd like to retire early. You do understand, Richard?"

"Of course."

She let the Major help her from the car, and waved him back. At this moment her concern was for Sandy, standing dispirited and wan beside her. The car did not move off till a lamp glowed in the lounge window of the bungalow.

Sandy made up Aunt Catherine's bed, lit the wood- stove, and prepared a light meal from tinned foods. She did some dusting and compiled a grocery list, after which the water was hot enough for baths. By nine o'clock they were in bed.

The Major arrived for lunch next day and brought the news that Katrina was again effervescing with party plans. For tomorrow evening she had arranged a trip up-river to Uisthage; for Tuesday, a *braaivleis* on the piece of land which Brin had given her - a sort of "land-warming". A large dinner-party in Pietsburg was booked for Wednesday, and an informal gathering in the farmhouse for Thursday. Friday was left free because the following evening she proposed to give the postponed celebration party for the Major and Aunt Catherine.

"I explained that you were not yet fit enough to brave the night air," he ended, "and she quite understood. I told her I thought we might go to dinner on Thursday as a kind of preparation for Saturday. She insists that Sandy must go every night. The car will come for her."

"I'm not going," Sandy said flatly. "Brin deposited me at the bungalow and here I stay."

After a second's hesitation Aunt Catherine murmured, "I'm on your side, Sandy. Katrina goes too far. But you will come next Saturday, won't you ... to please Richard and me."

Sandy nodded. "Of course. And I hope you'll then announce the great day."

"Not openly, darling. It will be in about three weeks."

Three interminable weeks! How in heaven's name was she to pass the time ?

To begin with, Sandy left them as soon as the meal ended and went to the kitchen to make bread with the flour and yeast Brin's house-boy had brought over this morning. While it was rising she baked coconut buns and almond fingers. Then the loaves were placed in the oven and the house-boy instructed to keep the fire in. At four o'clock she took tea out to the garden, and the rest of the day lazed away as Sundays do in any country.

Strangely, no word had come from the farmhouse since the Major had acquainted them with Sandy's wish to be omitted from all the festivities except Saturday's. Katrina came up from Pietsburg every day and tooted merrily as she passed the bungalow, but she never drew in.

At lunch, the Major reported on the previous night's entertainment. Uisthage, according to Katrina, was idyllic; the *braaivleis* crazy fun; the night out in Pietsburg a riot.

On Thursday the Major and Aunt Catherine had dinner at the farm, while Sandy stayed at home and revived the white dress with good quality diamante trimming. It had been dry-cleaned in Pietsburg, and was the best she could contrive for Saturday's party. Not that anyone would notice what she wore.

The Major brought Aunt Catherine home at ten and drove back almost at once. She looked pleased and restless; nothing was left of the abstract botanist. There had been about a dozen guests, all of them local and such fine people. She foresaw heaps of entertaining for Richard and herself later on.

"I've already invited the Van Ruiters for Sunday," she said. "They call it supper, not dinner. Staying with them are two young Englishmen who are learning farming - well-bred men with enough capital to start farms of their own as soon as they understand the country. I feel sure you'll like them."

A transparent remark which Sandy did not challenge. She was tired of match-making and the eternal topic of marriage.

"Uncle Johnny will fetch us a rib of beef from the butcher at Fort Cradock," she returned. "I'll send Adam over tomorrow with a message. Will you have some malted milk before bed?"

"No, my dear, but you must, Brin said he hoped you were looking better, and I've a nasty suspicion you're not, though I kept quiet about it. He'll be annoyed with me if you're white and listless on Saturday. He always blames me for everything that happens to you."

"You goose, to fret over nothing. The Major commanded that you go to bed at once, and I think you should. I'll bring you just a small warm drink."

Half an hour later, as she shot the bolt and turned down the lamps, Sandy found herself wishing that tomorrow were Saturday. She was aching with two overwhelming desires that for the moment obliterated all else: to feel the spacious walls of Tegwani House about her - and to see Brin.

In the middle of Saturday morning a storm burst over Tegwani, a magnificent spectacle of noise, light and torrential waters. From dawn the rain-birds had piped their warnings, and then came a long and uncanny silence before the wind got up and the sky blackened. Lightning flamed across the valley, thunder rocked the bungalow, and the rain came in a thick grey sheet that hammered on the iron roof and washed down the window-panes in a ceaseless avalanche.

By one o'clock, tanks and tubs were brimming and the sun was out again, filtering its misty gold over the tobacco fields and the trees beyond. Shortly after lunch, Katrina came up from Pietsburg in a

smart little coupe which. Aunt Catherine stated, was her own, bought and sent down from Rhodesia by her brother. A wedding-present, guessed Sandy, waving in response to the frantic arm which protruded from the window of the speeding car. She must be prepared to see and hear about other wedding-gifts.

Taking advantage of the morning's rain, Sandy and Aunt Catherine bathed luxuriously in eight inches of water each, and directly afterwards, because tonight was a special occasion, they took sundowners together on the stoep, before parting to get dressed.

As usual, the Major was on time. Sandy heard him arrive and waited a few minutes before leaving her bedroom for the lounge. Aunt Catherine, a sweet colour in her cheeks, looked lovely in grey, and the Major's military figure displayed to perfection a brand new dress suit.

"Always charming, my dear," he said to Sandy, but she knew he complimented her more from chivalry than sincerity. She had had to apply too much make-up.

She sat alone in the back of the car, no longer frightened of the evening before her. It could be lived through as she had existed through other ordeals. The familiar armour: a smile and few words. Four or five hours would tick away, second by slow second, and tonight would pass into history. Tomorrow was a new day, a step forward from anguish and disillusionment.

As they came within sight of Tegwani House, Aunt Catherine gave a small cry, for the place was encircled by coloured lanterns. Dozens of lights jewelled the palms and lantana and flame trees, and the rows of hurricane lamps each side of the drive reached from the gate to the front steps. The house blazed, and from somewhere inside burst the exotic rhythm of a gipsy dance. Two house-boys in starched white jackets with silver buttons sprang, one to open the car door and the

other to enquire if he might back the car into the cropped pasture beyond the garden.

Katrina and Brin stood in the open doorway and a few guests taking a preliminary cocktail were visible inside the hall. Katrina had chosen more mellow colouring for this evening's creation, a gentian blue marquissette. Diamonds studded the lobes of her ears.

"Our guests of honour and little Sandy!" she exclaimed. "How are you, Sandy? I want to kiss you all."

"Hold on," said Brin, "or you'll go up in smoke."

Their wraps disposed of, they went into the lounge for a cocktail. Sandy slipped into a chair near the bellowing record player and considered herself fortunate to be hidden by the boy who hung about ready to change the record. A few people caught her glance, nodding and smiling recognition. They must have remembered her from the *braaivleis*. So she was not a complete nonentity.

The room filled, the chatter and clink of glasses competing with the blare of music. Katrina came in. Sandy couldn't see her but her ringing tones, speaking in Afrikaans, must have reached every corner of the house.

When dinner was announced a young Englishman whom Sandy had met before offered her his arm. He seemed the moderate type who might help her considerably through the evening. But in the transfigured dining-room she lost him; he was a long way down on the other side of the huge table.

Sandy was seated about midway, just in front of a profusion of orange and yellow flowers cunningly illuminated from within. Napery, glass and silver gleamed in the glow of a dozen lamps, each different in shape and material.

Brin, of course, sat at the head of the table, with Katrina on his left and Mrs. Tremayn at the right. Urbane and watchful, he divided his attentions. Once, as the canapes were being served, he met Sandy's eyes across eight feet of space. His expression, tolerant, cynical, had not changed when her lids lowered.

It was as the boy ladled into her plate some lobster and avocado salad which she did not want that Sandy noticed the sapphire engagement-ring upon Katrina's finger. An engagement ring is so public, so final. A lump thrust up into Sandy's throat. She would have liked to slide out into the garden and disappear into the veld. Her neighbours, two local planters, spared her a word or two between courses, but they ate as though stoking against a rigorous winter.

More dishes appeared. Chicken mousse, cutlets, roast meats, salads of every kind, cold fruit pies and cream whips. Sandy tasted one or two of them, tried her wine and kept her teeth tight. By the end of the meal her head throbbed, her nose and throat ached with the salt of tears and her eyes smarted with the sudden reek of the strong tobacco *smoked on each side of her*. Desperately, she accepted a cigarette.

She became aware that Brin was standing, glass raised. The room quietened.

"Friends," he said. "Most of you have met Major Kennedy and his intended wife and have welcomed them both into our circle. Need I say more than that we all wish them the greatest possible happiness, together in the years ahead ? To the Major and the future Mrs. Kennedy!"

The toast was drunk and the Major replied with astonishing fluency. Then Brin rose again. This time his grin was mockingly bent upon Katrina, who sat looking up at him, laughing and brilliant-eyed.



"You all know Katrina," he began. "She'd steal anyone's thunder. It just isn't practicable to keep her in the background. In fact, I shall have no peace till she has a husband and farm of her own. A good many will envy Katrina's husband" - a concerted shout of jovial approval — "but I predict that he won't have things all his own way. Still, Conrad is expert with horses, which is mighty good training for handling a woman like Katrina ..."

Conrad ? The name buzzed through Sandy's brain. Who was Conrad ? Had she heard of him before ?

"... Tomorrow, Conrad de Lange and Katrina are going to Rhodesia, where they will be married. I have to go along, too, to support the groom. Shall we toast them, then? Conrad and Katrina!"

Nerveless, Sandy stared at the bowl of flowers. She saw herself at the corner of Brin's veranda, clutching the arms of one of his cowhide chairs. The voices below in the garden.

"What did I tell you, Conrad?" - from Katrina. "You should know that with Brin, everything waits till the harvest is over."

A cautious trickle of relief seeped through Sandy's consciousness. But she remembered the eavesdropped conversation so vividly. Why had Brin asked Katrina to wait till the orange harvest was over? Had he hoped time might prove to her that it was not Conrad she loved after all?

Deep down inside him was he in love with her? The old torment, wearing a different uniform, began again.

In the general movement from the dining-room to lounge, Sandy hurried through the french door to the veranda. She wished that there were fewer lights and that the air was even cooler, so that she might wander unseen and clearheaded among the rain-washed trees and try

to formulate something comprehensible from what she had just learned.

Her jealousy of Katrina was magically erased; to that extent her feelings were simplified. Between Brin and herself nothing was altered. He still despised her for the spurious engagement to Philip, still considered her foolish and sentimental, and - this hurt most - he had used her with sarcasm and indifference at a time when he must have known she needed sympathy.

Sandy's arm curved against a pillar and she pressed her forehead to the cold white stone. The music started up once more, a dance tune, mingling with the dull roar of conversation and laughter. It wasn't nine-thirty yet. At least three hours more of this ...

Something touched her arm and she raised her head and turned, a defensive smile on her lips. Brin was holding her short white evening coat ready for her to slip her arms into it.

"I knew you'd vanish straight outside from that stuffy room," he said, as she pulled the wrap about her. "You do the silliest things."

"Yes, I do," she answered, unable to keep the trace of weariness from her voice.

He came beside her at the veranda wall and flicked open his cigarette-case. She took one and waited for his lighter.

"You didn't offer Katrina your congratulations," he commented, shielding the flame as it met the tip of her cigarette.

"She was surrounded. I'll do it later."

The lighter snapped shut. He inhaled deeply. "Katrina's grand," he said. "She deserves to be happy."

"I'm sure of that."

"She and Conrad will be fairly close neighbours to Tegwani ... close for these parts. Conrad has built a new house on the land T made over to Katrina, near Fort Cradock. You could have seen it if you'd come to the *braaivleis* the other night."

"Are they going to grow citrus?"

"The soil isn't suitable. They'll dairy farm and breed horses."

A silence widened between them, Sandy squashed out her half-smoked cigarette and dropped it over the wall.

"So you're going to Rhodesia tomorrow?" It was out.

"Yes" - non-committally. "It isn't fair to make them wait any longer. Her brother has already completed arrangements for them to be married next week."

"And you're to be best man?"

"Something like that. Katrina insisted, though I'd have preferred not to leave Tegwani just now."

Guardedly, she commented, "I thought this was your off season."

He sent his cigarette sparking out into the garden. Half- turning he frowned down at her.

"I suppose you're disliking me still for the way I've treated you lately? You asked for it. Ever since you came here you've done nothing but hare after trouble. You were due for fireworks."

"I'll survive," she returned quietly.

"I only hope your experience with Graydon has taught you that there are times when you don't stick out your chin," he said grimly.

"Won't you let me forget Philip?" Her tones rose. "It's over, and I've emerged more or less unscathed. You warned me, jeered at me, prophesied defeat and eventually experienced the ultimate pleasure of knowing you were right all along. It's all been gone through. Can't you leave it at that?"

"I certainly would if you were cured, but you're not. You're still soft enough to give in to the next good-looking swine who might need your angelic influence combined with kisses and whatever else he could get out of you." His teeth clicked with the anger of exasperation. "I wouldn't have believed that an exterior so shy and typically English could hide such infuriating qualities."

"Leave me alone," she said tremulously. "I've stood enough."

The violence went out of him. After a moment or two he said stiffly, "Sit down. I'll get you a drink."

He didn't touch her, but waited until she had subsided into the cushions at one end of the lounge before leaving her. The comradeship of Umbulu was gone. If her knees weren't trembling so much she might have escaped. Above the irregular thud of her heart she heard a laugh, and Katrina came out.

"Sandy! We've been looking for you." The regal figure in blue paused above her, the amusement dying from the dark eyes. "You are unhappy, Sandy? Of course you are. Aren't we selfish, boasting our happiness to forty guests while you pine!" She dropped beside Sandy. "Brin was right when he called Philip a spineless bounder and not good enough for you. You need a man who will take care of you, one you can respect ..."

"I've just implied all that," said Brin as he reappeared, smiling irritably, with a glass in his hand. "Maybe we're both wrong. Maybe all she needs is a whisky and soda. Down this, child, and come inside and have some fun. This damned party of yours has tied us all in knots tonight, Katrina."

"But so it should," she protested. "Wait till your engagement party, Brin, and you will understand how I feel."

"Heaven forbid," he replied soberly. "You'd better go in, Katrina. The air's chilly and a sniffing bride is without glamour."

Katrina's laugh came back. "You two must come at once. We're playing 'Hunt the Gift' and you must find your parcels."

"All right." He gave her a little push. "Get going." To Sandy he said, "Take the whole of that drink. That's it. Feel equal to party frolics?"

She stood up.

"Good." Critically, he looked at her. He sighed sharply. "I've been a brute to you, haven't I?"

"Not... all the time."

"I want a promise out of you. I shall be gone about ten days. Will you stay with Mrs. Tremayn till I come back?"

"I ... think so."

"That's not good enough. You must promise."

Her head lowered. "I promise."

For an undecided minute neither moved. Then, unexpectedly, it was Sandy who turned towards the house. Brin handed her over to the

Major and disappeared. Sandy did not see him again till the midnight drinks and snacks were served, when he came into the lounge complete with his rare charm and mocking smile. She wondered where he had spent the hours and if the slight tiredness in his eyes were real or only in her imagination.

A few more dances followed, then a spirited chorus of *Sarie Marais*, and the guests yawned and smiled and called for their cars.

Aunt Catherine said, "My dear, I'm flat. I shall sleep for a week. Good night, Katrina ... Brin, it's been a party I shall never forget. I wish we could all be at your wedding, Katrina."

"I'm ashamed of her," said Brin. "*She's* decided to be a white bride."

"You see!" cried Katrina. "Even I go girlish over some things. Always I have told Brin I shall marry in a tweed suit. How I shall laugh if Brin's bride insists on a white wedding. Poor Brin ... so exposed with a pretty white flower on his arm." In her excitement the "Breen" was very pronounced.

Conrad's slow, heavy tones put in, "Are we going to bed tonight, or shall we finish ourselves off entirely with a ride?"

The Major's car started up. Sandy knew a suffocating need to touch hands with Brin, to feel reassurance that they were friends - or nearly. But he was standing aloof from the other two, and though he watched the car his glance did not seek her out.

In the morning Sandy woke late. She reached for her watch. A quarter to nine. Depressed, she lay back on her pillow. Brin was gone ... only for ten days, but he hadn't said good-bye.

She forgot that this time yesterday she had languished in the grip of a shattering despair. That was over. Now, she was faced with new issues.

Last night she had seen that Brin was a man uneasy within himself, and in a way that fact that he, also, had his emotional problems, brought him closer. She tried to believe that Katrina was not at the root of them, though his affection for her was so patent. If it were only possible to question a man on such things.

Why had he extracted from her a promise to stay at Tegwani till his return? Why had she consented? The second was easy to answer ... because she couldn't help it. Whatever Brin asked she had to do. Just like that.

A little later, dressed in crisp cream linen, she tapped at Aunt Catherine's door.

"Come in, Sandy. How young and fresh you look. No headache?"

"Not noticeably. Have you?"

"I awoke with one but it's fading. Sit here and talk to me."

Sandy got on to the foot of the bed, drawing one foot under her . She hooked a magazine on to her lap and swished the pages.

"Some party, wasn't it?" she observed. "What was your present?"

"An onyx needle-case. Very smart."

"Mine was a gold cigarette-case with my initial on it. Katrina must have spent plenty of money and a hectic week."

"Brin bought the presents," mentioned Aunt Catherine. "Katrina only wrapped and hid them."

"Oh!" She must examine the cigarette-case again. "The evening was certainly as full of surprises as Katrina threatened. She had kept Conrad very dark."

"Not purposely. The Afrikanders knew all about him, and I was introduced to him just before you left for Durban, though I didn't learn that he was going to marry Katrina till last Thursday evening."

Sandy looked up. "You ... knew Katrina was engaged to Conrad de Lange? You didn't say."

Aunt Catherine gave a small embarrassed laugh. "Brin asked me not to. I don't know why. At least, I ..." She let it tail off and tried again. "I always thought of Brin marrying Katrina. He never denied it."

Sandy turned a few more pages, her lip drawn in. When she spoke again it was on a different subject.

The Major was already transferring his belongings to the bungalow. Today, he brought over a huge and heavy trunk which, he proposed, he and Aunt Catherine should sort through this afternoon. A boy had driven him and he was sending him back for another large box.

"Why don't you go with him, Sandy?" suggested Aunt Catherine after lunch.

Sandy looked startled. "To Tegwani House? What for?"

Aunt Catherine shrugged. "For the ride. Brin was saying the guavas will rot in his garden if they're not picked. Take a basket and bring us a few back."

It was too neighbourly an act to be associated with Brin. He was more likely to tell a boy to gather the fruit and take it to the bungalow. Still, it was something to do, and a way of leaving the others alone.



As the car sped down towards the orange farm, Sandy surveyed Brin's domain. How calm and beautiful it looked in the sun. Soon, his trees would burst into wax-like blossom - orange blossom. Would she be gone by then ? Her breath caught. Better not to think about it for ten days. Ten days was eternity.

The farmhouse, cradled peacefully within the trees, wore an air of unobtrusive grace and opulence. Sandy took her basket into the garden and filled it. At the foot of a palm she set it down and, irresistibly, she was drawn towards the house.

The door stood wide. Brin's house was always kept aired while he was away. Softly, she went in and paused, in the tangible hush of the place. She could see inside the lounge; tapestry chairs, polished floor and Indian rugs. A pace or two brought her to the dining-room door. Last night's trappings had gone; the usual severe elegance remained.

A thought quivered through he mind. Dare she ? It was that door, the one in the recess. Only once had she entered it, a long time ago when Brin had first begun to scoff and taunt her about Philip.

Noiselessly, she turned the handle and closed the door behind her. Just as she remembered it; desk, bookcase, friendly chair - even the photograph. Now she would know.

A pulsing in her ears, she grasped the frame. No, it was not Katrina. It might be Katrina at forty-five, Katrina softened by years of joy and suffering. A sort of relief and hurt gathered together in Sandy's chest. Without being told, she knew that the woman in the photograph was the mother he never talked about.

At a small sound she twisted. Brin was inside the room, hands in his pockets, his face set.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, trying hard to keep her voice normal. "It was unforgivable of me to pry."

Quite gently, he took the photograph from her and replaced it with its back to the light. "I'd have shown it to you some time." He gazed down at her and now his features were tinged with a faint cool smile. "I'm glad you came in here, though you took long enough about it."

"You ... watched me?"

He nodded. "From the small sitting-room, the one with the baggy chairs. I thought you'd choose that room and I was waiting there for you."

"Waiting?" she echoed dazedly, adding superfluously, "You didn't go to Rhodesia."

He gave a brief, discordant laugh. "Apparently not, and you're the cause. I asked the Major to see that you came back today in the car. Sandy, you and I have got to be straight with each other. You've given me the devil of a time these last weeks, ever since the evening of the river party when I saw you kissing Graydon. I intended to say all this at Umbulu, but you weren't ready, and somehow I couldn't get into the right mood after our first encounter. Before the kissing episode I hadn't taken the Graydon business too seriously, but that night I could have strangled you both!"

She was frightened, pleading. "Brin... do you mean ..."

A muscle jerked in his jaw and he spoke with bitterness. "That's exactly what I do mean. Funny, isn't it, that I should fall in love with a child who doesn't know the meaning of the word? I'd have seen the joke myself if it hadn't been so damned painful." Points of fire leapt in the grey eyes. "I wish I had the pluck to let you go, but if I did you'd haunt me for ever. Had anyone told me a year ago that a soft-

spoken bit of a girl would get right under my skin, I'd have laughed myself sick. Well, the joke's on me. I'm going to marry you, but I'm going to hate it..."

Swiftly, her hand came up and covered his mouth. She was half crying. "No more, Brin. I won't listen. You can't love me and resent me, too."

Savagely, his arms closed round her. Pent-up fury was in that kiss, as well as a hungry yearning. When she could stir to look up at him, she said gently.

"If only you hadn't been so proud and pigheaded, Brin. I've loved you from the beginning. That's what made the other so heartbreaking."

He muttered something in Afrikaans that sounded much more terrible than its English equivalent, and kissed her again. Gradually, she felt the anger draining from him, and a new tenderness taking its place.

A little later he took her into the lounge and called for tea. She sank into a chair and he rested on the arm of the chesterfield nearest her, staring down at her with a curious, pulled-in expression.

"Can you imagine how I felt when I heard you'd left for Durban?"

"No. Tell me."

"I doubt if I can. My first impulse was to come after you, but when the Major told me Mrs. Tremayn had decided to follow you, I thought that might work out best. I was living in a private hell, wanting *you* but hating the girl who'd let herself become engaged to Graydon. Then the Major gave me the news that the engagement was amicably cancelled, and I was relieved but still mad with you. Pride kept me from chasing off at once to Umbulu, but I was on the point of surrender when you wired the Major."

"Oh, Brin, the time we've wasted! Why did you stay away from us all last week?"

He smiled, rather self-consciously. "For the same reason that I forbade Katrina to call on you, and accepted the Major's excuses for your staying away from me: I knew I could make you love me, but I didn't want you on those terms. I hoped the sudden knowledge of Katrina's engagement to Conrad might... well, tilt at your equilibrium. Why didn't it?"

"In a way it did. It disposed of Katrina, but I was still uncertain of you. Surely you never expected me to cast myself into your arms?"

"No," he said bluntly. "Hardly that." After a pause, he added, "When we've had some tea I'll drive you to the bungalow and we'll wade through explaining to the Major and Mrs. Tremayn what they've probably surmised already. This evening you'll have to find time to throw a few things into a bag."

"Where am I going?"

"To Rhodesia. I'm not letting you out of my sight and I told Katrina we'd follow tomorrow morning."

""We?" Her eyes went large.

He grinned. "Katrina guessed, after seeing us together last night."

"What did she say?"

"Just what you'd expect. She laughed a lot and said it served me right, and she kissed me."

The tea came and Brin transferred to a chair, to pour. Sandy watched him, loving his clumsiness and the unusual colour that had come up under his tan. The blessed sweetness of not having to cover up!

"Brin, it doesn't matter now, but why did you let me think you were in love with Katrina?"

"Pride again," he said, "and to make you writhe as I was writhing over you and that boulder. I admit it. Katrina was my ace card and I played her for all I was worth. She was taken up with thoughts of Conrad and didn't notice anything out of the way."

Hesitantly, she asked, "You're fond of her, aren't you?"

"I am, quite a bit. One reason is that photograph you saw in my cubbyhole. The other ... well, Katrina lost her fiancé a year or two ago. It took the spirit out of her and she has only been as you know her for the last year. When she came down in the spring I was so glad to see her right again that I encouraged her to have friends here, hoping that way she'd find a husband. She did. Grief hardened her; marriage will do the other thing." A pause. "Is the tea all right?"

It was horribly sweet, but she nodded, smiling.

"You never did tell me what you were going to do when Auntie married," he said. "I expect you had it all mapped out. It should be somewhat entertaining."

She examined the teaspoon, solid silver, with a windmill that turned as a handle. "Naturally, I couldn't have stayed with them. I thought round ..."

"Yes," he prompted her with a trace of acid, "you thought round..."

"You remember Paul Adriaan and his wife were going to Namibia?"

She was unready for the crash of his big brown fist upon the trolley.

"I knew it! All the time and tears you wasted on that fellow go for nothing. You come up with your smile gone crooked, begging for

more - nursing an ambition to educate the Namibian natives. You're hopeless!" The fist descended again, rattling the teacups, and he leaned across, speaking quite close to her face with a fierceness that made her blink:

"Listen, child. From now on you're a person, not an appendage. You're Brin Masterson's wife. You run a home, you entertain, you boss the staff. You can try bossing me, if you like. And remember this, anyone who's lived here for a couple of years has the right to call herself a South African; if she's of English blood so much the better. If your charitable soul requires an outlet, you won't have to look farther than our own Africans. Understand?"

Her eyes shone with tenderness. "Yes, you bully."

"One thing more. Before we leave for Rhodesia in the morning we'll get a licence so that we can marry the minute we get back." He grimaced. "I expect you want a white wedding and a honeymoon."

"Don't you?"

"I'll bear it," he said. "If you like, we'll even have a picture taken to give the youngsters a laugh at their pa when they grow up."

Moisture glistened on Sandy's lashes. She got up and went to the window. He came behind her and held her shoulders, turning her gently till he could meet her lips in a long, hard kiss. It seemed to Sandy that she had lived through her whole life for this moment, to be possessed by Brin.